

When the Kingdom of God Became the Kingdom of Ends:
Altruism's Development into a Normative Ideal

A Senior Honor Thesis

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with distinction in Political
Science in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences*

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December 10, 2006

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Abstract

In contemporary moral philosophy, altruism holds a place of prominence. Although a complex idea, the term seeps into everyday discourse, by no means confined to the esoteric language of philosophers and psychologists. Altruism for many is synonymous with morality. Noble actions are carefully scrutinized to find evidence of self-interest and, in the rare cases where the hero's motivations are pure, praise flows unchallenged.

The current environment, so disposed to altruism, is peculiar when examined in the context of past moral debates. The concept of altruism would puzzle an ancient Greek or Roman, who understood morality as the highest form of self-interest. Ancient ethics' inability to convincingly argue for self-sacrificing action, such as political service, illustrates the disconnect between ancient and modern moral paradigms. How, then, did this radical change come about?

This work endeavors to trace, if not exhaustively, at least the major points along this development. To explain moral discourse's shift in the direction of altruism, I focus on two ideas in particular: the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Ends. We find that, with the introduction of these concepts, there are growing misgivings about self-interest's role as the basis for morality. Christianity, especially the Augustinian strand, breaks from ancient philosophy in saying that earthly well-being should be abandoned in pursuit of a higher goal—the Kingdom of God. Kant's moral philosophy makes even further strides towards altruism. His moral kingdom does not depend, as does Christianity, on the hope of future rewards.

Yet, despite the innovations in their approaches, Augustine and Kant fall short of what can be called true altruism. Ultimately, their normative arguments are unable to fully overcome self-interest's influence. All of Augustine's misgivings about self-love do not stop him from claiming that serving the Lord brings about great benefits. Although Kant never makes such an explicit concession to self-interest, his problematic account of pure reason's ability to motivate moral action is an unsatisfactory alternative. Kant's description of reason fails to achieve universality and objectivity, leaving it little hope of surviving the skeptic who questions reason's moral authority. The only other option—allowing self-interest a motivational role in normative action—seems unavoidable.

Augustine and Kant provide insight into the nature of altruism. In short, they show that the prospects of formulating a coherent, normative argument for altruism are bleak. Unable to appeal to self-interest, arguments for altruism have no motivational force on certain individuals and thus they fail. But though altruism proves untenable as a moral ideal, that does not in itself negate altruism's existence. Evidence suggests that, for certain individuals, altruism constitutes part of their standard expectations about the world. They do not need to be motivated to act altruistically because for them such action is as natural as, say, driving on the right side of the road. Rather than denying altruism, I want to suggest that we should think about it in descriptive, not normative, terms.

Acknowledgements

The question that initiated this thesis project was whether or not altruistic motivation is a requirement of moral action. Although never under the illusion that finding an answer to such a question would be easy, I never could have imagined the sheer diversity and number of subsequent questions it would raise. Before everything was over, my research had taken me into fields as diverse as neurobiology and Jansenist thought. At numerous times I felt like I was in over my head. Fortunately, I had friends and mentors around me to offer encouragement and throw out a figurative life preserver when needed.

I am grateful first of all to a number of friends who allowed me to try out arguments on them, and who never grew tired of hearing the word altruism (or at least never showed it). Through discussions with Charlene Chi, Kenny Ferencak, and Laura Tompkins, I gained helpful feedback on which arguments of mine were effective and which were not. Kenny in particular would find holes in my views on altruism, and always would push me to evaluate them in an honest manner. I may have never convinced him that altruism fails as a normative ideal, but our conversations were nonetheless important for they helped me understand in a very real way the principled convictions of the opposing side of the debate.

I also owe a big thanks to Taylor Nelms who, while working on his own thesis, took time out from his research to explain to me the art of making a poster in power point. Before receiving his detailed instructions, I was absolutely clueless on how to design a poster to present my project at the Denman Undergraduate Research Forum.

The Denman Forum helped to further my project in various ways. I need to start off by thanking Richard and Martha Denman for sponsoring the event. The annual competition was an enjoyable experience, which brought me in contact with the research of my peers. It also gave me a venue to practice explaining my research to those outside of my field of study. My three judges for the competition—Professor Deborah Haddad, Professor Richard Herrmann, and Professor Katherine Meyer—all offered constructive criticism while at the same time being encouraging. I especially appreciated Professor Herrmann's pragmatism, which forced me to reevaluate some of my theoretical positions on altruism. I am grateful for the prize I received at the competition, which went towards costs related to the thesis.

Other sources of funding for the project came from the Honors and Scholars Program, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Humanities. The internship I received from the Honors and Scholars program allowed me to spend the summer of 2006 writing the majority of my thesis. The scholarships from the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Humanities paid for tuition costs during my final quarter, when I was finishing up the thesis. I generally would like to thank the Ohio State University for making these opportunities possible. More specifically, I would specifically like to thank Donald and Sidney Brandt, who funded the Humanities Scholarship I received.

Throughout my work on the project, a number of professors in the Political Science and Philosophy departments took time out of their busy schedules to answer questions and read drafts

of my work. I would like to thank Professor Allan Silverman for his help on the section on Plato, as well as for reading one of my many project proposals. I am also thankful to Professor Lawrence Baum, who met with me on a variety of occasions to discuss the topic of altruism and who also read drafts of the work.

The faculty members who sat on my thesis committee were Professor Justin D'Arms, Professor Michael Neblo, and Professor John M. Parrish. These were the individuals most involved in critiquing my work and offering suggestions on how to improve it. Professor D'Arms' and Professor Neblo's comments on Part III were particularly insightful, and I only wish I had had more time to incorporate them into the final version of the thesis. As I continue to research the subject of altruism, I will keep their critiques in mind—they will certainly figure prominently in any future version of this work.

Lastly, I owe a special thanks to the final member of my committee and the primary advisor for the project, Professor Parrish. Since the project's nebulous beginnings my sophomore year to its completion two years later, he has constantly been there supporting me and offering invaluable guidance. Even after moving to Los Angeles, Professor Parrish continued to do the bulk of the advising for the thesis, though he was under no obligation to. I long ago lost count of the number of outlines and drafts he had read—suffice it to say, it was no small number. In his evaluations of my work, he invariably found the perfect balance between challenging and encouraging me. His overall influence on the thesis is difficult to overestimate, as so many of its ideas stemmed from his classes on political thought that I took or from work I did as his research assistant. If the thesis bears any resemblance to the work of a political theorist, much of the credit must go to Professor Parrish's tutelage during my time as an undergraduate.

Introduction

“Nobody is this nice.”

— Elaine, *Seinfeld*

Whether it is George, Jerry, Cramer, or Elaine, the main characters of *Seinfeld* spend each episode doing essentially the same thing—trying to maximize their self-interest while maneuvering through a complex system of societal norms. It is an economist’s dream world: self-interest governs their actions with rule-like regularity, so much so that one begins to think that any other way of acting is impossible. When the characters encounter individuals who do not fit this pattern, they are at a loss to explain them. A classic example comes from the episode entitled “The Raincoats,” in which Elaine’s boyfriend, Aaron, goes out of his way to make sure that Jerry’s parents enjoy themselves while in New York. Without anything apparently to gain from the Seinfelds, he gives them money, treats them to dinner, as well as takes them to an art exhibit and a play. Dumbfounded, Elaine and Jerry unsuccessfully try to make sense of Aaron’s actions:

ELAINE: I know they're your parents, Jerry, and they're very nice people. But don't you think it's odd that a thirty-five year old man is going to these lengths to see that someone else's parents are enjoying themselves? I mean don't you find that abnormal?

JERRY: It is a tad askew.

ELAINE: I mean they're your parents and you don't do anything, so why is this stranger doing it?

JERRY: I've hardly been out to dinner with them.

ELAINE: See! See! I can't even say anything, you know, because all he's really doing is being nice but—but nobody is this nice. This is like certifiably nice.

JERRY: You're right. He's insane.

ELAINE: Yes, he's insane. That's what I think.

Niceness in the absence of personal gain eludes explanation. Even small acts of altruism have no room in the Seinfeldian universe—except, that is, as incomprehensible aberrations.

For quite some time, we have been living in a Seinfeldian universe, or at least that is what the experts say. Although the longstanding consensus recently has started to crack, the orthodox view in the social sciences during the twentieth century was that self-interest lurks behind all human actions. F.Y. Edgeworth sums up the bedrock of economics in his assertion that “the first principle of Economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest.”¹ The same outlook has dominated in psychology and psychiatry, which, according to Donald Campbell, “not only describe man as selfishly motivated, but implicitly or explicitly teach that he ought to be so.”² Political science, in its efforts to be a “science,” has also leaned heavily on models grounded in self-interest, such as the much celebrated rational actor model. To explain human behavior, the social scientist inevitably turns to self-interest. Serious science has had little room for altruism and the unquantifiable warm fuzzies it evokes.

Despite its successes, however, the self-interest paradigm prevailing in the social sciences gave rise to discontent. First of all, in their quest for parsimony scholars simplified a wide range of actions full of nuance. Is helping behavior *always* a case of seeking some sort of reward? In instances of sacrificing for another, the single currency of self-interest strikes many as an inadequate descriptive tool. One may persist in calling all helping actions self-interested by adopting the following definition: whatever is an actor’s final choice constitutes that which is in her self-interest. This definition has the effect of making every action an instance of self-interest.

¹ F.Y. Edgeworth, *Mathematical Psychics: An Essay on the Application of Mathematics in the Moral Sciences* (London: C.K. Paul & Co., 1881), 16, quoted in Amartya K. Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory,” in *Beyond Self-Interest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 25.

² D.T. Campbell, “On the Conflicts between Biological and Social Evolution and between Psychology and Moral Tradition,” *American Psychologist* 30 (1975): 1104.

But such an approach to human behavior robs many helping actions of their essential meaning—namely, their other-regarding orientation. Suffice it to say, the wide spectrum of human motivation fits uncomfortably within the narrow confines of the self-interest model.

A perhaps more significant barrier blocking the self-interest model from achieving consensus is altruism's firm status as a moral ideal.³ The idea that altruistic acts have special moral value permeates common sense beliefs about morality. A common response to apparent acts of kindness is, "What does the person helping stand to gain from her action?" Those whose deeds are deemed truly altruistic become symbols of virtue for their communities. Our heroes—Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the firefighters who rushed into the World Trade Center—inspire admiration because of the incredible sacrifices they made for others. Altruism's strong normative appeal undermines perspectives limited to self-interest.

There exists, then, a certain discontent with the Seinfeldian worldview in which a selfish motive lies behind every action. Part of this discontent may be due to biological factors: altruism is hard-wired into us, as some evidence suggests,⁴ so we get irritated when scholars try to explain it away. Another factor that is just as important, if not more so, is culture. The idea of altruism illustrates, more than anything, the way we think about actions. A thin line often exists between a self-interested and altruistic action. The dinner invitation we receive may be an attempt to curry favor or a gesture of genuine concern for our well-being. Nevertheless, under the intense scrutiny of moral inquiry the difference between these two superficially similar actions becomes magnified. In this light, self-interest ceases to be unavoidable and rather becomes a questionable source of motivation.

³ Elliot Sober, "The ABCs of Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, & Religion in Dialogue*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

⁴ Part IV: The Science of Altruism, in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Post et al., 249-350; see also "Evidence for Altruism on a Descriptive Level" in Part III below, 95-112.

The Western tradition in particular has a long history of scrutinizing the moral character of motivations. Altruistic motivation lacked moral value throughout most of Western moral thought, but after tortuous debate it eventually rose to a position of moral authority. It is this story—altruism’s development into a normative ideal—that is the focus of this study. As we shall see, the debates of the past have helped to ensure that, despite sustained efforts to ignore, forget about, or simply reject the possibility of altruism, altruists were never relegated to a lunatic fringe but rather remain paradigms of moral behavior. Past debates in Western thought, seemingly disconnected from the world of today, in fact hold the key to explaining widespread acceptance of altruism as a moral ideal. Up against a cultural tradition that enshrines altruism, *Seinfeld*’s take on human motivation seems to miss the mark.

The Paradox at the Heart of Altruism

The fierce attacks altruism has endured are unsurprising given how elusive coherent explanations of the concept prove to be. Scholars and lay people alike struggle to fully comprehend altruism’s nature. The concept is so full of nuance that it takes on an almost ethereal quality. When reflecting on altruistic action, one finds it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to imagine acting for a reason other than one’s own subjective desire or interest. The mere act of deliberation can bring one’s own projects and interests flooding into the imagination, pushing to the side any thoughts of the other. As a result, the idea of altruism often collapses in one’s mind after the slightest analysis. Understandably, the possibility of altruism remains controversial even after centuries of debate.

Altruism proves paradoxical in nature because it demands self-abnegation while at the same time purporting to be something of value for which to strive. If altruism is laudable and

good, as many assume, how does altruistic action entail sacrifice? In other words, does not altruistic action ultimately benefit the altruist? Rather than being altruistic, the altruist has the appearance of realizing an enlightened form of self-interest. The slightest admission of benefits accruing from other-regarding actions—likely if they have moral value—immediately raises doubts about “altruistic” motivations.

The difficulties encountered in explaining altruism become even more acute when trying to convince others to adopt it. For someone who believes that people should be altruistic, formulating a persuasive, coherent argument is a daunting task. The common strategy of emphasizing the beneficial effects of a certain course of action will not work in this instance. Drawing attention to altruism’s benefits will at best convince someone to change their actions for self-interested reasons, but in no way will it lead someone to altruistic behavior.

This paradox—arguing for altruism causes it to collapse—besets all those who take on the challenge of defending altruism. It is this peculiarity about altruism that reoccurs again and again in debates about its moral status. In fact, as altruism starts to become synonymous with morality, the problems associated with arguing for altruism begin to plague moral arguments in general.⁵ Morality strikes one as the highest good, yet someone who consciously seeks out morality’s benefits seems to misunderstand the point of being moral. A means-ends approach to morality does not value morality as such but rather the goods it brings about, which raises questions about one’s commitment to moral action. So in both the case of altruism and morality, the following puzzle arises: the goal—being altruistic or moral—becomes unattainable once one focuses on it. Whether or not this puzzle can be solved is at the heart of the altruism debate, for a solution is a necessary prerequisite for a normative conception of altruism.

⁵ See, e.g., H. A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind* 21 (1912): 21-37.

Defining Altruism and Normativity

Before continuing forward, it is important to define two terms that are salient throughout this investigation: altruism and normativity. Both of these terms invoke general notions yet at the same time elude clear-cut definitions. Altruism in particular is fraught with ambiguity since a wide variety of disciplines have adopted the term without much concern for preserving a shared meaning. The term appears frequently in the context of biology, philosophy, and psychology, resulting in a multiplicity of definitions. (This point is evident in the unwritten obligation, carried out almost invariably, that an author must define altruism before using the term.) In biology, altruism normally refers to actions that hurts an organism's fitness—i.e. ability to pass its genes on—while benefiting the fitness of other organisms.⁶ This definition excludes considerations of motives, understandable since we cannot ask a rat or a giraffe what was on its mind when it acted a certain way. By contrast, in psychological analysis, whether in philosophy or psychology proper, altruism turns entirely on the question of motives. Non-selfish interests motivate altruistic action, which stands in contrast to self-interested action. With regards to psychological altruism, specific actions are relevant only to the extent that they reveal the motivations underlying them.

Since this study focuses on the altruism's development in Western thought, which has tended to focus on it terms of human motivation, our definition will refer to the version of altruism used in philosophy and psychology (unless otherwise stated). This clarification by itself, however, does not go far enough. Even within philosophy and psychology there are competing definitions of altruism. Of course, no definition is necessarily right—one can define a term however one wants. It nevertheless is important to capture to the greatest extent possible shared

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, new ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4; and Sober, "The ABCs of Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al, 17-18.

notions about altruism. With this in mind, our definition of altruism will follow the prevailing opinion in philosophical and psychological literature, namely, that altruistic action starts with motivation whose ultimate goal is improving the welfare of others rather than one's own.⁷

This conception of altruism has a long history, stretching all the way back to the 18th century when Joseph Butler introduced it to the Rolls Chapel in London. Although the word altruism was not in Butler's lexicon, his characterization of benevolence would become the foundation for modern conceptions of altruism. Butler refuses to give in to the tautology that all action must be self-interested since some personal desire lies at the bottom of all motivation. There could be, he points out, "affections in human nature, the object and end of which is the good of another; this is itself benevolence."⁸ Although a benevolent affection or desire still originates in me, it is not self-interested because its end is another's welfare, not my own. Butler's description of benevolence matches well with understandings of altruism both in the field of moral psychology and in commonsense moral beliefs. For these reasons, it will serve as our definition of altruism from hereafter.

Besides Butler's definition, another popular definition of altruism focuses on the sacrifice it involves. Kristen Renwick Monroe adopts such a definition in her book, *The Heart of Altruism*: "[A]ltruism [is] behavior intended to benefit another, even when this risks possible sacrifice to the welfare of the actor."⁹ Although Monroe's definition appears to compete against Butler's, I want to emphasize their continuity with each other. If I act altruistically, as defined by

⁷ See Daniel C. Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 6; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 462-466; Sen, "Rational Fools," in *Beyond Self-Interest*, ed. Mansbridge, 31 (Sen uses the term "commitment" rather than "altruism" but expresses the same concept); and Sober, "The ABCs of Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al, 18-20.

⁸ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, in *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), I, 6.

⁹ Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

Butler, that means the interests of others motivate me. To act in such a manner, I must put aside my own interests to a certain extent. That may involve something as simple as putting down a book so as to open the door for a stranger whose hands are full; or it may involve a more significant commitment, such as giving up one's life-long dream of being a writer so as to care for a chronically ill friend. These cases of altruism are drastically different, yet they do share one thing in common—a clear element of sacrifice. An altruist must sacrifice her interests, whether absolutely or to a degree, when interests other than her own motivate her. Therefore instead of offering contrasting views on altruism, these two definitions complement each other by highlighting different aspects of altruistic action. Butler's definition focuses on the goal of altruistic action, whereas Monroe's focuses on what the actor sees as the consequences of such an action.

Admittedly, there could be exceptions in which Butler's and Monroe's definitions do not directly coincide. For example, my personal desires and the desires of others may motivate me to carry out the same action. Such cases do not demand sacrifice since nothing forces me to give up pursuit of my interests while acting in the interests of others. My motivation is therefore mixed. We, however, will ignore this complication for several reasons. First of all, an outside observer watching mixed motivation in action finds it impossible to tease out the altruistic element of such motivation with any certainty; purely self-interested motives could have produced the exact same action. The standard test for altruism therefore must look at how one acts when one's own interests conflict with those of others. We reasonably deem as falling short of altruism those individuals who forsake the interests of others whenever they cease to coincide with their own interests. A second reason to disregard mixed motivations is that, simply put, this sort of motivation fails to capture our attention. How often, after all, do we need to convince individuals

to act in a way that helps *both* themselves and others? What fascinates us is those instances in which someone serves another despite standing nothing to gain. It is this sort of behavior that consistently ends up at the center of debate. Thus instead of depriving altruism of its meaning, limiting it to cases of pure altruistic motivation involving sacrifice brings out its nature more fully. Equating Butler's and Monroe's definitions of altruism turns out to be one of those rare simplifications that facilitates debate with little loss to the substantive meaning its trying to express.

One of the few terms able to rival altruism in nuance and ambiguity is normativity. Generally the term normative is understood in relation to its antonyms, descriptive and positive: the normative refers to how things ought to be, whereas the descriptive refers to how things are. When applied to individual actions, normativity tells us how we ought to act. As Christine Korsgaard puts it, "The normative question is a first-person question that arises for the moral agent who must actually do what morality says.... You ... ask the philosopher: must I really do this? Why must I do it? And his answer is his answer to the normative question."¹⁰

So normativity answers the question, What morally ought I to do? Before moving on, we need to unpack some of the meaning bound up in the moral ought, even if in rather a cursory manner. It is safe to say that ought expresses a value judgment. In invoking ought, the moral actor asserts value for a certain action, whether that be because of intuition, the dictates of reason, God's will, or some other reason. A more tricky issue is whether ought implies can. Completely disjoining ought from can proves problematical because it leads to the destruction of ought as a tool in moral discourse. If ought and can are unrelated, claims invoking ought will lose any and all influence over people's action. Hearing the word ought will not make an action any less impossible, so what's the point of listening to moral arguments at all? Believing in the

¹⁰ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16.

viability of moral discourse—otherwise, why engage in it?—this study will operate under the assumption that ought implies can, at least when considered in isolation. There may be situations in which multiple conflicting oughts arise, making it impossible to carry them all out.¹¹ But at least in the abstract, ought implies can. After all, it seems unfair to tell someone making minimum wage that they ought to contribute a million dollars to a hospital. Making this demand of Bill Gates, on the other hand, is easier to justify. What a moral actor ought to do is closely tied with her capabilities.

With a better understanding of the moral ought, we are now in a position to further clarify normativity's meaning. A normative claim that something ought to be done expresses both value and possibility for a certain action. These features of normativity translate into three requirements for a claim to be normative: (1) it references something of value; (2) it possesses motivational content; and (3) its motivational content is translatable to others. The first requirement is more or less straightforward, but the second and third requirements call for further explanation. The second requirement guarantees that an action is possible from a first person perspective; without motivational content, the link between belief and action is severed. The third requirement also guarantees the possibility of an action, this time with regard to others. Being able to translate motivational content means that a normative argument can motivate others, creating oughts for them. It is this last requirement that proves the most elusive.

These requirements for normativity are especially important for evaluating normative arguments for altruism. As is usually the case, the third requirement—being able to translate one's motivation to another—presents particular difficulties for those arguing for altruism. Showing that one ought to be altruistic unsurprisingly is no easy task.

¹¹ Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956-1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 166-86.

What Are We Looking For?

Debates about altruism span the long, rich history of Western thought. The relatively recent coinage of the term altruism superficially hides this fact. The actual term first appeared in French as *altruisme* in the writings of Auguste Comte around the middle of the 19th century.¹² But despite altruism's relatively short history as a word, the idea it captures—action motivated by concern for the welfare of others—surfaces much earlier in moral and philosophical writings. As early as the fourth century BCE, Aristotle took up the question of altruism in a chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. “There is ... a puzzle,” he writes, “about whether a person should love himself or someone else most of all; for people criticize those who like themselves most, and call them by the derogatory term ‘self-lovers.’ Indeed, it does seem that the bad person does everything for his own sake, the more so the more wicked he is.”¹³ Aristotle expresses concerns about self-love but ultimately concludes that “we ought to be self-lovers,”¹⁴ a point his contemporaries and immediate successors accept without debate. Later we will go into detail on why Aristotle came to the conclusion he did. What is important here is that he felt compelled to address questions about the moral quality of self-interested motivation. These issues to which Aristotle spoke would continue to occupy people's minds from the time of the ancients into the Modern Age. Before the word altruism existed, terms like of benevolence, charity, self-love, and self-interest were bandied around in lively debate. In tracing altruism's development in Western thought, we therefore will have to look beyond the term introduced by Comte.

As for the sorts of context in which altruism turns up, one of the most common is in arguments for self-sacrificial action. When attempting to convince others to sacrifice for others, a

¹² Thomas Dixon, “The Invention of Altruism: Auguste Comte's Positive Polity and Respectable Unbelief in Victorian Britain,” in *Science and Beliefs: From Natural Philosophy to Natural Science*, ed. D. Knight and M. Eddy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 196.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1168a.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1169b.

disputant can opt for one of two strategies. First, she may argue that there is only the appearance of sacrifice: after truly understanding an action, one will realize that it ultimately benefits oneself. So, for example, military service makes exacting demands, even at times one's life, yet the praise and psychic goods associated with honorable service outweigh its costs. Such an argument tries to minimize the obvious physical risks and appeal to more subtle elements of self-interest. Second, she may ignore appeals to self-interest, and instead argue that an objective standard requires a certain action. She may believe moreover that the action in question will lose its value and moral worth if tainted by self-interest. In this case, one serves one's country because living in a community creates obligations that must be honored; the soldier who serves in search of glory entirely misses the point. This second approach to justifying self-sacrificial behavior raises altruism up as a normative ideal. Undoubtedly, an appeal to altruism is a hard sell to make—especially to someone facing a sacrifice as great as risking one's life.

For most of the history of Western thought, appeals to altruism have been rare. Normative conceptions of altruism were virtually nonexistent in ancient ethics because it operated in a eudaimonistic framework, in which personal happiness or human flourishing constituted the highest good. The eudaimonistic framework stayed largely intact with the arrival of Christianity, except that now heavenly happiness replaced earthly happiness as the highest moral goal. Both outlooks emphasized the goods rightful action provides, leaving little room for altruism in moral discourse. How, then, did altruism ever gain a foothold as a normative ideal?

Alasdair MacIntyre provides a guidepost on where to look for this change in his seminal work, *After Virtue*: "It was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that morality came generally to be understood as offering a solution to the problems posed by human egoism and that the context of morality came to be largely equated with altruism. For it was in that same

period that men came to be thought of as in some dangerous measure egoistic by nature.”¹⁵

Altruism developed into a legitimate moral option when the egoistic side of human nature was seen as too depraved to provide moral guidance. Of course, negative views of human nature had been around well before the 17th and 18th centuries. Saint Augustine, after all, produced the account of wretched, fallen man *par excellence* during the closing stages of the Roman Empire. The key difference, however, lies in changing views towards God. Augustine was sure that God would guarantee a harmonious relationship between his commands and human happiness. Enlightenment thinkers, on the other hand, had increasing doubts about God’s position as an omnipotent care-giver who assiduously looks over his creation. These doubts about God translated into doubts about the close link traditionally thought to exist between morality and happiness. A god detached from the world, much less a universe without a god, cannot ensure that moral action will always result in happiness. In this chaotic world, most famously depicted in *Candide*, the best one can hope for is to act rightly without like Voltaire’s miserable characters losing a butt-cheek or drowning in the process.¹⁶ With God relegated to the sidelines, those distrustful of self-love had no other choice but to put their full faith in moral standards demanding altruism.

Immanuel Kant’s ethical theory proved to be the most influential and enduring account of normative altruism. He argued that rationality created certain requirements for action, which, among other things, included altruistic action of treating others as ends in themselves. The central role of reason in his theory illustrates his belief in the need for and possibility of a secular moral theory. To be sure, Kant was no atheist. Nevertheless, his Kingdom of Ends was not a reformulation of the previous moral ideal, the Kingdom of God, but instead represented a new

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 227-28.

¹⁶ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), V, XII.

moral ideal in itself. This new kingdom, emphasizing duty rather than heavenly rewards, marked the culmination of altruism's development into a moral ideal. Altruism's rise, however, raised as many questions as it did answers. By making reason the motivational foundation of altruistic action, Kant provided a shaky foundation for normative altruism. If reason by itself fails to motivate, altruism's normative status collapses—after all, a moral ideal incapable of motivating is useless. The coherency of altruistic motivation continues to be the most pressing concern in debates about altruism's normative status. Lacking a convincing account of altruistic motivation, altruism's development into a normative ideal has always seemed somewhat incomplete.

Roadmap of What's to Come

In the pages that follow, we will trace altruism's development into a normative ideal, as well as reflect on the coherency of this outcome. Guiding our investigation is the conviction that past cultural debates are inextricable from current ones. The past shapes the way we think, defining the problems we confront in the present.¹⁷ By examining past debates about altruism, this study endeavors to diagnose the causes of current confusion surrounding the concept, before then proposing a solution for how to move beyond this confusion.

The argument takes place in three stages. Part I, "Towards a Problem: The Ancient Debate over Public Life," shows why altruism clashed with ancient ethics by focusing on the question of whether or not the wise man should go into politics. This concern about public service was essentially a question about altruism. Politics offered little to the wise man seeking the goods of contemplation, yet by making the sacrifices demanded by politics he could greatly benefit the community. Almost invariably, ancient thinkers counseled against entering politics. Christian thinkers, specifically Saint Augustine, eventually offered a solution to the ancient

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 349-69.

debate over public life. Augustine argued that political service provides an opportunity to serve the Kingdom of God, thus offering a compelling reason for Christians to take on the burden of public service. It was a step in the direction of altruism, but by no means an all out embrace of it given the salient place of heavenly rewards in Christian thought.

Part II, “Self-Love’s Fall from Grace: How Normative Altruism Developed Out of the Augustinian Tradition,” looks at how self-love became controversial as a basis for morality after the rise of Christianity. Augustine’s despairing account of human nature particularly shaped the debate on self-love. Augustine saw the vast majority of self-love as corrupt; only a very specific self-love leading to love of God was good. Self-love’s stock fell further when religious wars and growing skepticism created doubts about God’s role in reconciling morality with happiness. Moral action and self-love became estranged from each other, forcing the philosophers of the day to look elsewhere for a new starting point for morality. The result was Kant’s moral theory, which, though problematical in places, remains the most influential argument for normative altruism.

Finally, Part III, “The Problems with Normative Altruism,” reflects on some of the problems plaguing normative conceptions of altruism. Neither Kant nor his successors have succeeded in providing a coherent account of altruistic motivation. By looking at the insoluble difficulties involved in motivating others to act altruistically, I suggest that we should reject the idea that altruism is normative. Regardless of its normative limitations, however, there is strong evidence that altruism is a very real phenomenon. I therefore reach the conclusion that, instead of thinking of altruism as a normative ideal, we should rather think of it as a descriptive phenomenon.

One thing not found below is a defense of altruism's value. This study operates on the assumption that there is widespread appreciation for altruism. When shifting through descriptive evidence for altruism in Part III, we will look at the basis for human beings' strong attraction to altruism, but there is no justification for this basic attraction. Altruism's appeal is ingrained into human nature, which in turn makes it to an extent unavoidable. Perhaps this aspect of altruism justifies its value. Perhaps it does not. Since not everyone shares the view that altruism is worthy of value, it is foolish to believe that everyone will accept this assumption. I am fairly confident, though, that most individuals will find the assumption acceptable, given how pervasive positive views towards altruism are in Western culture.

For those who do consider altruism to be a potential source of value, it is my hope that this study will prove of some practical value when confronting the question of altruism in one's own life. Inevitably, occasions arise when our focus turns to our own motivations. At these moments altruism ceases to be the subject of abstract philosophical debate and becomes a very real problem we cannot avoid. Does morality demand that *I* be altruistic? Although it may be too ambitious a goal to fully resolve this question, in the end hopefully we will come away with a better sense of the direction of an answer. At the very least, the study forces us to reflect about the proper place for altruism in life, which in itself counts as a success.

Part I

Towards a Problem: The Ancient Debate over Public Life

“You must therefore each descend in turn and live with your fellows in the cave...”

— Plato, *The Republic*, 520c

Benjamin Constant seemed to be on to something when he made his famous speech distinguishing ancient and modern conceptions of liberty.¹ We moderns, Constant argues, tend to focus on individual liberty. We would rather be left to ourselves rather than be hassled with politics. It is hard to argue with his point, especially after more votes were cast during a finale of American idol than for any United States president—ever!² We can only imagine ancient reactions to reality TV, but we can be sure that they would have found such political apathy appalling. As Constant explains, the ancients valued political liberty above all else. They were willing to make sacrifices in their personal lives so as to maximize their ability to participate in decision-making in their community—their source of identity and pride. Missing, though, from Constant’s speech was mention of one important ancient exception: an eccentric bunch of individuals known as philosophers.

While most ran off to the glorious activity of public service, philosophers kept their distance. Politics understandably piqued many people’s interests, given its promise of wealth, honor, and power. Philosophers, though, were content to contemplate, investigate, and problem-solve far away from positions of power. They had little interest in politics because it took them away from their preferred activity of contemplation, and, moreover, because its constant intrigues threatened their virtue. This refusal to go into politics, though understandable, created a dilemma. Philosophers knew that, as wise men, they were best suited to solve the problems plaguing their communities. By refusing to make the sacrifices demanded by politics, they let the

¹ Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,” in *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 307-28.

² Mark Sweeny, “American Idol Outvotes the President,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 26 May 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1783339,00.html>> (26 July 2006).

rest of the community down. Fully aware of this regrettable consequence, the consensus among philosophers did not budge: the wise man stays out of politics.

Philosophers' attitudes towards politics illustrates how self-sacrificing actions—which political action inevitably was for the wise man—presented an insurmountable obstacle to the ancient moral framework. The central concept driving ancient ethics was the concept of *eudaimonia*. The moral life was that life achieving *eudaimonia* or, in other words, a life characterized by happiness and human flourishing. Starting from this belief, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to formulate a moral argument incorporating altruism into it. For this reason, the wise man typically did not act altruistically and go into politics but instead did what was best for himself. A truly compelling argument for political service would not appear until after the arrival of Christianity. Specifically, Augustine overcame Christianity's strong pacifist roots to argue that politics provides the wise man with an opportunity to serve the Kingdom of God. By shifting the emphasis from an earthly to a heavenly ideal, earthly sacrifices started to make moral sense, as they were part of a higher purpose.

***Eudaimonia* and Ancient Ethics**

To understand why public life was so problematic in ancient ethics, we first have to look at the basic structure in which moral discourse took place. The sorts of arguments found in ancient moral philosophy were notably different from those of today because they all ultimately appealed to the same principle, *eudaimonia*, roughly meaning happiness but perhaps best translated as human flourishing. All arguments, then, operated on the same plane: if one was able to show that a certain way of life best conduced to *eudaimonia*, that argument carried the day. This general consensus on the goal of morality sets past thought apart from contemporary moral

discourse, where now one can start from any of a number of paradigms—deontology, existentialism, intuitionism, utilitarianism, virtue ethics—and still make a respectable moral argument. By no means should ancient thought be characterized as uniform, for in fact we find among the ancients a great diversity of opinions with regards to the moral problem. But, when it came to defining the limits of moral discourse, the ancients were able to reach a rough consensus.

Aristotle sums up best *eudaimonia*'s flexible yet bounded nature. "Most people," he writes, "agree about what [the highest good] is called, since both the masses and sophisticated people call it happiness, understanding being happy as equivalent to living well and acting well."³ But, as in all things, the devil is in the details. Although they agree that happiness is the goal, there is fierce disagreement over what happiness actually consists of. Aristotle therefore must qualify his statement above with the following: "[People] disagree about substantive conceptions of happiness, the masses giving an account which differs from that of the philosophers."⁴ Once one gets beyond the initial agreement on the aim of life, understood broadly as happiness, all semblances of moral consensus quickly disappears. Otherwise, without such disagreement, Aristotle and the other ancient philosophers would have had little incentive for taking up the question of morality in their writings.

Given the underlying agreement about the goal of morality, the same basic approach characterizes ancient moral arguments: Let me show you what *true* happiness is. There is no need to demonstrate that happiness is good, for everybody already agrees on that. Thus in the *Symposium* Diotima can respond to Socrates' claim that good things make us happy by saying, "there's no need for a further question about a person's reason for wanting to be happy. Your

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1095a.

⁴ Ibid.

answer seems conclusive.”⁵ For an argument to be convincing, it has to clearly demonstrate that the life in question is indeed happier than the alternatives. Only in this way can a philosopher, or anyone for that matter, clinch his or her argument. The question at the heart of any ancient enquiry into morals is always, How am *I* to live well? This focus differs greatly from modern enquiries, which instead gravitate around the abstract question, What is right?⁶

This distinction between ancient and modern conceptions of morality is essential for understanding why altruism was missing, for all extensive purposes, in ancient thought. In the question, What is right? personal happiness is irrelevant to morality. Some independent objective standard commands the individual to act in a certain way; moral action consists of obeying this command irrespective of its consequences on one’s personal well-being. Since one obeys the command solely because it is right, self-love does not come into the equation and thus makes altruistic motivation a real possibility. But the question in ancient ethics, How am I to live well? raises personal happiness up as central element of morality. Of course, in pursuing happiness one does not have to entirely ignore the needs of others. Many of the ancients in fact emphasized the importance of cultivating meaningful relationships with others, in which other-regarding actions were indispensable. But ultimately an individual engages in such relationships because of the benefits they bestow. Morality always remained for the ancients the highest form of self-love. As Aristotle tells us, “the good man should be a self-lover.”⁷

This claim by Aristotle captures the consensus within ancient thought, making clear that the ancients did not equate morality with altruism. Despite Aristotle’s unequivocal affirmation of self-love, certain scholars still have tried to adduce evidence of altruism from ancient writings.

⁵ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 205a.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 84.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a.

Charles H. Kahn, for example, suggests that the idea of altruism is found in the writings of Aristotle despite appearances to the contrary. Specifically, he focuses on Aristotle's views of friendship.⁸ Kahn locates altruism in the claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that a friend does or wants good for the other's sake.⁹ Kahn admits that this altruistic element of Aristotle's theory of friendship operates alongside an egoistic element.¹⁰ Such a concession is necessary since Aristotle derives friendship from love of self,¹¹ in addition to praising friendship as one of the highest goods possible in the world.¹²

If Aristotle's characterization of friendship is at least partially altruistic, as Kahn contends, friends will seek out each other's interests even in instances when self-love gives no reason to. Otherwise, valuing a friend's interests for his own sake proves to be subservient to self-love. To make this determination, we need to find an instance in which friends' interests do not coincide with each other. Fortunately, just such a case appears in the *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.7. Here Aristotle takes up the question of whether or not friends should wish one another the highest good—to be a god. Sure the friend who becomes a god will have it made, but the other friend will lose out. Since gods have better things to do than hanging out on the weekends with mere mortals, the human in the relationship will forever lose a friend, one of the greatest goods in life. What, then, should a friend do? Should he be altruistic, wishing his friend to be a god, or does he rather opt for the selfish option that keeps his friend mortal and close by?

Aristotle comes down on the side of the option guided by self-love. A friend wishes good to his companion, Aristotle tells us, but within certain limits, “since it is for himself most of all

⁸ Charles H. Kahn, “Aristotle and Altruism,” *Mind* 90 (1981): 20-40; see also Julia Annas, “Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism,” *Mind* 86 (1977): 532-554.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a.

¹⁰ Kahn, 24.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a-b, 1168a-1169b.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1155a.

that each person wishes what is good.”¹³ Aristotle’s assertion, then, that we value the good of a friend for his own sake comes with the following qualification: we only engage in such behavior when it contributes more broadly to a friendship that benefits us. On Aristotle’s view, the costs and benefits of actions for a friend become lost in the love permeating a meaningful friendship; in fact, one has to forget about costs and benefits to enjoy the incredible goods offered internal to a friendship. Yet once it becomes clear that these goods are no longer forthcoming, such as when a friend stands to become god, one ceases to have a reason to value the goods of a friend for his own sake. Thus anything done for a friend remains subservient to self-love. By taking this view, Aristotle is not a heartless in his view of friendship, seeing it as only another way to reap personal benefits. Instead, with the concept of *eudaimonia* guiding his moral thinking, he is well aware of friendship’s advantages and honest in sharing them—perhaps more so than is true today. Aristotle remains faithful to the eudaimonistic framework by eschewing altruism in favor of self-love as the foundation of his theory of friendship.

Aristotle’s writings on friendship provide just one glimpse into how the idea of living well, achieving *eudaimonia*, dominated ancient thinking about morality. *Eudaimonia*’s pervasive influence also turns up in the Greek word for virtue, *arete*, which means excellence or the best that one can do. It needs to be pointed out that *arete* has a broader meaning than our modern conception of virtue. *Arete* refers to objects that are not strictly moral as well, since things outside of the sphere of morality (i.e. human behavior) also have excellences. The *arete* of a horse, for instance, is running fast.¹⁴ When applied to human beings, their specific *aretai* are those things that are essential for a happy, flourishing life—that is, essential for the most

¹³ Ibid., 1159a.

¹⁴ Roger Crisp, “Introduction,” in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, xiv; Philippa Foot, “Virtues and Vices,” in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 2.

excellent human life.¹⁵ Virtue and happiness, then, were inseparably linked together in ancient Greek thought.

The same conception of virtue continued to hold sway over the inheritors of the Greek philosophical tradition, the Romans. The Latin word for virtue, *virtus*, has essentially the same meaning as the Greek *arete*: *virtus* consists of whatever leads to true personal happiness.¹⁶ Thus throughout the pre-Christian period there was little debate on the general meaning of virtue. When speaking of virtue, without fail the Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman writers referred to those traits that directly benefit the person possessing them.

Despite virtue's set meaning in ancient thought, it gave way to a wide variety of arguments. It would be a mistake to conclude that, since the ancients agreed that virtue led to happiness, they shared the same opinions on how to live virtuously. As we have already mentioned, there can be conflicting views on what happiness consists of, which in turn leads to disagreements about the nature of virtue. Disputants may arrive at diametrically opposed positions on the content of virtuous living, even though they start from the same premise—virtue is that which leads to happiness.

Such is the case in Plato's *Republic*. Socrates' opponent in the *Republic*, Thrasymachus, makes an impassioned argument for "[t]yranny ... wholesale plunder, sacred or profane, private or public." Tyranny more than anything, he claims, is a virtue, since it "brings the highest happiness to its practitioners."¹⁷ From a eudaimonistic point of view, Thrasymachus makes a valid and, indeed, forceful argument. After all, how often does one see a tyrant in want, unable to meet his basic needs? Hardly ever if he is as ruthless and rapacious in oppressing the people as

¹⁵ A. W. H. Adkins, "The Connection between Aristotle's Ethics and Politics," *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 45-48; and Kathleen V. Wilkes, "The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 354-56.

¹⁶ Robin Campbell, "Introduction," in Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 15.

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 344a-b.

Thrasymachus recommends. Socrates obviously disagrees, and spends the rest of *The Republic* trying to convince us that Thrasymachus gravely errs in his prescription for happiness.

Thrasymachus' tyrant is not happy at all, Socrates tells us, because he becomes a slave to his unbridled passions and desires. The truly happy man could not be more different: reason, the highest element within him, orders his soul and keeps his desires in check. In this way, he keeps his desires from impeding him in his ascent to eternal truth, *the Good*. Such an individual achieves the pinnacle of human existence, and on Socrates' view is far happier—729 times happier, to be exact—than the tyrant.¹⁸ By taking much different views on the nature of happiness, Socrates and Thrasymachus consequently disagree on what constitutes a moral life.

A eudaimonistic approach certainly allowed for a diversity of moral arguments, but it also had its limits. A framework centered on personal happiness and well-being necessarily left little room for arguing that self-sacrifice in itself is valuable. The obstacles posed by self-sacrifice were especially salient in ancient debates about public service. Arguments advocating for the sacrifices demanded by politics inevitably butted up against the walls of the eudaimonistic framework. Without any alternatives, the issue stymied ancient moral debate.

Plato and Aristotle

The first stop in our survey of ancient philosophy takes us to ancient Greece. Out of the milieux from which ancient political thought sprung, it is here that we find the setting most hospitable to political participation. The Greek *polis* was politics on a small level, where the average citizen felt a palpable connection with the political activities in his community. It was nothing out of the ordinary for him to play a role in decisions that directly impacted how the body-politic governed itself. Unlike the expansive empires of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, in which the

¹⁸ Ibid., 571a-592b.

individual felt lost, in the *polis* the lives of its citizens existed in close proximity to and even overlapped with the day-to-day operations of government. Politics was not some distant operation but a real part of their lives.

The *polis* is the reference point for all of Plato's and Aristotle's discussions, reflections, and conclusions on politics. For them, the *polis* and its cozy surroundings *are* politics. Given this environment, a favorable treatment of political service is understandable, even expected. After all, such a political environment is more inviting than most: there is no unbridgeable gulf between the citizen and government, as it is part of his immediate community. Plato and Aristotle, then, seem to have good reason to praise the virtues of political service. Yet, as any reading of the *Republic* and Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes clear, they are reluctant to recommend a life in the public sphere. In fact, the conclusion they both reach—politics takes one away from the highest good, contemplation—undercuts any appeal that public service may have. If it is indeed the case that politics forces one to give up one's pursuit of the highest good, what reason does the wise man have to enter politics? It is this problem more than any other that baffles Plato and Aristotle. Both recognize that politics is necessary for the good of the state, yet it proves virtually impossible to convince others to sacrifice their well-being in service of the state. Bound by the eudaimonistic framework, Plato and Aristotle fail to find a compelling reason for political service.

In his *Republic*, Plato approaches the decision of whether or not to enter politics from the viewpoint of the virtuous philosopher. The views of the philosopher, the wise man, are the only ones that interest Plato. He is well aware that, for many people, politics holds tremendous appeal. Those with a materialistic conception of the universe, for example, who want nothing but wealth, honors, and pleasure, find in politics a means to acquiring all that they desire. Plato uses the

character of Thrasymachus to illustrate this perspective. Thrasymachus is effusive in his praise for political action: by manipulating the machinery of the state, one obtains practically limitless material goods. One's goal thus should be to seize power, no matter what one has to do. Such an argument does not impress Plato, who insists we look beyond it for true answers on how best to live. On Plato's view, Thrasymachus' system of values causes him to miss the mark. Obsessed with material possessions, he gives no consideration to the goods of pure reality, which are tasted only after intense study and thought. These goods transcend those of the material world; experiencing them constitutes the peak of human happiness. The philosopher enjoying such happiness exemplifies the highest existence. It is only from his perspective—the true perspective—that one arrives at an accurate assessment of the harms and benefits of political action.

Tension clearly exists between the life of the philosopher and the life of politics, so much so that on Plato's account the two are irreconcilable in almost all circumstance. Political participation fails to advance the philosopher's goals, and in fact it often puts them in grave danger. Specifically, the corruption (arguably) inherent in politics threatens the philosopher's virtuous, happy existence. Politicians seek gains in wealth and territory, and are willing to do anything it takes—lie, steal, kill—to achieve these aims. Plato's philosopher seeks instead the Good, embodied in such concepts as reason and justice. He never harms anyone, for this would be contrary to justice's aim of benefiting others.¹⁹ His beliefs, goals, and entire philosophy share nothing in common with the realm of politics. Although he is capable of bringing an end to all the troubles of the state—indeed of humanity itself!²⁰—he stays away from politics. And who

¹⁹ Ibid., 335d.

²⁰ Ibid., 473d.

can blame him? Who would listen to him when his ideas are so radically different from those dominant in politics?

Plato compares the plight of the philosopher to a navigator surrounded by a crew obsessed with power. While the crew plots and fights amongst each other, finally lavishing praise on the brute who wrests power away from the captain, the navigator sits idle. With his knowledge of the stars and winds, he alone knows how to guide the ship. He does not dare speak up, however, since the sailors are “bound to regard the true navigator as a word-spinner and a star-gazer, of no use to them at all.”²¹ A philosopher, with his radical ideas about justice, would look like a fool among people who disregard it entirely.

The problems facing philosophers do not stop here. Beyond suffering humiliation in politics, they would risk destruction to both body and soul. “[I]f they’re not prepared to join others in their wickedness,” Plato laments, “and yet are unable to fight the general savagery single-handed, they are likely to perish like a man thrown among wild beasts, without profit to themselves or others, before they can do any good to their friends or society.”²² Whether they fight for virtue or yield to the wickedness of the state, political action would take away everything dear to them. Due to its deleterious effects, such action is contrary to virtue. The only recourse for philosophers is to “live quietly and keep to themselves, like a man who stands under the shelter of a wall during a driving storm of dust and hail.”²³ Virtue lies in a quiet life guided by reason, outside of politics and free from its vices.

Plato rules out political participation in a corrupt state. More generally, the philosopher avoids politics altogether, since all states are corrupt according to Plato. The only circumstance in which a philosopher will participate in politics is if an ideal state like that outlined in the

²¹ Ibid., 488b-489a.

²² Ibid., 496d.

²³ Ibid., 496d-e.

Republic happens to come along—which Plato himself concedes is unlikely.²⁴ But even the limited claim that philosophers rule in the ideal state is controversial. Before ruling philosophers come to know the ultimate bliss: they free themselves from their chains, climb out of the false reality of the cave, and discover the true nature of things in the world above. Totally immersing oneself in this new reality constitutes the peak of *eudaimonia*, for nothing else can compare. Forcing philosophers to then return to the cave in all its wretchedness strikes one of the *Republic*'s interlocutors, Glaucon, as an illegitimate demand. "[T]hat will not be fair," he protests. "We shall be compelling them to live a poorer life than they might live."²⁵ Plato, speaking through Socrates, counters by insisting that the philosophers return because they owe it to their community, whose education system made possible for them the pleasures of philosophy. Regardless of which side of the argument is correct, one thing is clear: philosophers do not want to return to the cave, otherwise there would be no reason to compel them back into the world of darkness and shadows.²⁶

Understandably, Plato's claim that the philosopher is obliged to return to the cave sparks fierce debate among interpreters of the *Republic*. If justice is in one's interest as Plato says, why should there be any hesitation on the philosopher's part about doing the *just* thing and returning to the cave to rule one's fellows? Plato seems to be suggesting one of two things: (1) that the philosopher lacks a good reason to rule because doing so is not in his self-interest; or (2) that justice is not always in one's self-interest. Either way, Plato's argument is in serious trouble. If (1) is the case, Plato's ideal state theoretically crumbles as it is left without a ruler. This has the further consequence of showing that the well-being of a group is at times incompatible with the well-being of the whole; after all, the other classes in the state will be worse off when the

²⁴ Ibid., 592b.

²⁵ Ibid., 519d.

²⁶ Ibid., 519e-521b.

philosopher abandons them to seek his own good of a contemplative existence. Justice thus becomes relative, a claim Plato wants to refute, not affirm. If (2) is rather the conclusion we draw, then Plato fails to answer Thrasymachus' challenge. The *Republic* proves to be a disappointment because it is unable to give a good reason to be just, its primary goal.

Several attempts have been made to save Plato from having to make either of these concessions so devastating to his argument that justice accords with self-interest. We will look at three such attempts, the first of which is by C.D.C. Reeves. Reeves makes the argument that the philosopher returns to the cave because, despite appearances to the contrary, it is in his self-interest. Although contemplation is the philosopher's ultimate good, he cannot achieve it without the prior good of a stable *polis*. Such a state of affairs only comes about, Reeves writes, when philosophers rule: "For if they do not rule, the Third Polis will be torn part by civil war. And without that polis, even philosophers cannot be reliably happy throughout life."²⁷ To support his claim, he quotes the following passage from the *Republic*: "It is hard to realize that there can be no happiness, public or private, in any other polis [i.e. a polis ruled by the philosopher]."²⁸ Reeves therefore reaches the conclusion that philosophers "rule for *themselves* as well as for others."²⁹

Reeves's rather simplistic solution confronts several problems. First of all, if we accept Plato's claim at 473e without qualification, as Reeves does, Plato is committed to saying that there is no happiness in the world. After all, the ideal state possessing happiness does not exist, and according to Plato probably never will. But what about those who do philosophy in less ideal states? Are they not happy in their contemplative activities? Plato suggests that philosophers can

²⁷ C.D.C. Reeves, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 202.

²⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 473e.

²⁹ Reeves, 202.

still be happy in corrupt states, writing that “they see the rest of the world full of wrongdoing, and are content to keep themselves unspotted from wickedness and wrong in this life, and finally leave it with *cheerful composure and good hope*.”³⁰ Read in the context of this passage, Socrates’ claim that happiness is found only in the ideal state appears to be a bit of hyperbole in the midst of debate.

So if we accept that the philosopher can be happy in less than ideal states—which seems reasonable enough and has textual support—Reeves’s interpretation falls apart. Knowing that he can achieve happiness without going into politics, the philosopher seeking his self-interest surely will stay out of politics. He would best realize his goal of contemplation by staying as far away from political intrigue as possible, not by expending the enormous energy required to mold the political system according to his goals. For self-interest to explain the philosopher’s return to the cave, we must define it in a manner different than Reeves.

Richard Kraut puts forward a definition of the philosopher’s self-interest different than Reeves’s, which leads to an alternative solution. Instead of limiting self-interest to the activity of contemplation, he defines self-interest as acting justly. Such an approach seems to accord with the *Republic*’s general project of showing that justice accords with self-interest. Kraut admits that this particular act of justice, returning to the cave, looks as if it conflicts with the philosopher’s interests when Plato talks of having to compel the philosopher to carry it out. But in this case compulsion does not mean that ruling goes against the philosopher’s interests. As Kraut writes,

the claim that an act is a necessity is entirely compatible with its being in one’s best interests. Surely what explains that talk of necessity and constraint in this passage is the point that it is not up to the philosophers to do whatever they think best in this situation. They are not free to act in any way whatsoever because, in

³⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 496d-e (my emphasis).

light of the great benefits they have received, they owe it to the city to make an equivalent return.³¹

Having shown that one can be compelled to do something in one's interest, Kraut goes on to show that ruling actually is in the philosopher's interest. By promoting harmony and order in the city, the philosopher helps to transform the city into an imitation of the realm of the forms, the epitome of justice. Such action accords with the interests of philosophers because, "understanding the entire argument of the *Republic* for the thesis that justice coincides with self-interest, they will come to see that in fact they will not be sacrificing their good by holding political office."³²

But wait a second. Is not Plato's argument, as interpreted by Kraut, circular? He says the philosopher rules because he knows that justice is in his self-interest, and since ruling is just, it is in his interest to rule. Yet the first assumption—justice is in his self-interest—is what Plato is trying to prove. Thrasymachus will not grant this assumption. What Plato has to do is show how specific acts of justice benefit the person carrying them out; only in this way can he establish that justice equals self-interest. Kraut's mistake is to take this point for granted at this stage in the dialogue. In fact, Plato's silence on the beneficial effects of ruling for the philosopher signals a failure to answer Thrasymachus' challenge. Plato goes on and on about the beneficial effects ruling has on the state, but Thrasymachus could care less. He wants to know something else. In the words of Adeimantus: "Prove to us ... not only that justice is superior to injustice, but that, irrespective of whether gods or men know it or not, one is good and the other evil because of its inherent effects on its possessor."³³ Plato accepts this challenge. Yet in the passage on returning

³¹ Richard Kraut, "Return to the Cave: *Republic* 519-521," in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238-39.

³² *Ibid.*, 238.

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, 367e.

to the cave, Plato seems to be trying to elude this very challenge. Kraut's interpretation does little to show otherwise.

Another problem with Kraut's reading is that, if imitating the forms through ruling is in one's interests, one should desire to rule regardless of whether one owes it to the community.³⁴ Kraut, however, wants to say that the philosopher only descends when the community has provided him with some good. He seems to be shifting between two definitions of justice. In one instance, justice is imitating the order and harmony of the forms; in another, it is upholding our obligations to others. Of course, the two definitions overlap to a great extent: keeping our obligations produces a harmonious society similar to the realm of the forms. But if we are to define justice strictly as imitation of the forms—which Kraut does in the majority of his article—that commits the philosopher to ruling even in states that have not helped him. Although he does not have an obligation to the people in such states, he still will try to bring about the realm of the forms in their communities. Such an act is just and, if Kraut is to be consistent, in the philosopher's interest.

A solution more creative and thoughtful than Reeves's or Kraut's comes from Allan Silverman. It specifically has the advantage of fully addressing—more so than the previous two interpretations—the philosopher's sense of regret when having to rule. If ruling is unquestionably in the philosopher's interest as Reeves and Kraut contend, why does he need to be compelled, why does he hesitate? According to Silverman, the philosopher hesitates, not because "he leaves behind contemplation, but [because] he cannot expect to achieve the truly fine goal of everyone being a philosopher."³⁵ The ignorance inherent in human beings necessarily prevents the philosopher from making everyone else into philosophers. He returns to

³⁴ Allan Silverman makes this point in "Philosophical Anarchy and Realpolitik in Plato's *Republic*," Seminar Paper, 14.

³⁵ Silverman, 3.

the cave to remove the blinders from his fellows' eyes, yet Plato knows that some will resist. His job always will remain incomplete, and thus he hesitates to begin a job at which he knows he will fail. In the end he accepts the task because "his knowledge of the Good bid[s] him to descend."³⁶

The problem with Silverman's reading is that it is too inconsistent with the text. First of all, Silverman plays down the role that giving up contemplation plays in the philosopher's sense of regret. "[A] philosopher," he writes, "is not doomed to stare at a single Form because it is the best, and does not have to contemplate in order to be living or doing philosophy. So his regret [from having to rule] cannot I think be that he gives up philosophy."³⁷ Whether philosophy encompasses ruling is debatable. What is clear, however, is that Plato considers contemplation the pinnacle of pleasure. After contemplating the forms, philosophers "are unwilling to involve themselves in human affairs, and ... their minds long to remain in the realm above."³⁸ Obviously, the philosopher cannot but feel regret when forced to give up such transcendent pleasure. Second, Silverman's interpretation commits him to saying that the philosopher will rule in a variety of circumstances rejected in the *Republic*. For Silverman, the demands of the Good lead the philosopher to rule even in imperfect cities.³⁹ Plato, however, is very clear that a philosopher only has a reason to rule in a city that has brought him up as a philosopher.⁴⁰

Therefore neither Reeves, Kraut, nor Silverman solves the paradox of why the philosopher must be forced back into the cave. This inability to adequately explain the passage is to be expected, for only after accepting the lack of a solution does the paradox begin to make sense, even if it does not go away. Justice and self-love do not ultimately coincide for the

³⁶ Silverman, 11.

³⁷ Silverman, 33.

³⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 517c-d.

³⁹ Silverman, 32.

⁴⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 520b.

philosopher returning to the cave because the two concepts remain separate in Plato's mind. To ensure that both converge on all points, he would have to equate justice with self-love as Thrasymachus does. Most of the time Plato is able to convincingly show the benefits of justice (traditionally understood), yet there are occasions where he is forced to try to fit a round peg in a square hole. That is exactly what happens when the question of ruling comes up. Plato realizes that the activity of ruling never accords with the philosopher's interests, and thus the reason for the tension in the passage. More so than any other place in the *Republic*, he shows that something beyond self-love—justice—must inform the philosopher's actions, as well as our own. He does not draw unnecessary attention to this point because he is operating in a eudaimonistic framework. According to its rules, a moral position is convincing if it shows that the action in question benefits its possessor. By diverging from this characterization of morality, Plato gestures towards the idea of altruism. To be sure, it is not much more than a gesture: he is talking about ruling in an ideal state that does not exist. In the real world, the philosopher has no obligation to help others through political engagement. Nevertheless, this baby step by Plato is still important when looking at the development of altruism in Western thought.

The obstacles besetting Plato's discussion of political service also prove insurmountable for his pupil Aristotle, despite fundamental differences in their philosophies. On the surface, Aristotle's thought is much better suited for making an argument for public service. Plato's philosophical system leaves little room for politics from the outset, since pursuit of the Good overshadows all other concerns. Aristotle rejects Plato's characterization of the Good, and instead prefers to see the world in terms of a plurality of goods.⁴¹ Precisely, there are three

⁴¹ For one of the best discussions on Plato's and Aristotle's different views on human goods, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, revised ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

groups of goods: “those called external goods, goods of the soul, and goods of the body.”⁴²

Similar to Plato, Aristotle believes the goods of the soul to be superior, but he breaks with his mentor in his insistence that such goods by themselves are insufficient for happiness. One achieves the goods of the soul only through virtuous activity, which in turn requires certain external goods. Happiness, then, “obviously needs the presence of external goods as well [as virtuous activity], since it is impossible, or at least no easy matter, to perform noble actions without resources. For in many actions, we employ ... friends, wealth, and political power.”⁴³ By defining happiness in a broader manner than Plato, Aristotle allows a greater role for activities outside of contemplation—such as politics—in his view of the good life.

Aristotle makes clear that politics offers goods that are not merely beneficial but essential to human happiness. As Aristotle famously writes in the *Politics*, “man is by nature a political animal.”⁴⁴ A political community exists “for the sake of a good life,”⁴⁵ and it is only in such an environment that human beings flourish. Aristotle expresses this same idea in the *Ethics*, writing, “one’s good will presumably not exist without ... a political system.”⁴⁶ Politics provides a foundation for human life; without such a foundation, all of the higher goods in life prove unattainable.

Of course, Aristotle’s claim that politics is vital for human well-being is not necessarily the same as claiming that one should enter politics. Aristotle certainly affirms politics’ importance, yet it is unclear to what extent it should be a part of the individual’s life. Some commentators contend that Aristotle does in fact consider public life to be valuable and one of

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098b.

⁴³ Ibid., 1099a-b.

⁴⁴ Ibid., *The Politics*, trans. B. Jowett and ed. Stephen Everson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1253a.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1252b.

⁴⁶ Ibid., *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a.

several existences suitable for the wise man.⁴⁷ Most of the evidence for this point of view comes from the *Ethics*. First of all, Aristotle spends nine out of the work's ten books detailing how to act virtuously in our interactions with others, which shows the importance he places on achieving excellence in interpersonal relations. Public service falls under this general focus since it represents one level on which we interact with others. Moreover, in certain places Aristotle goes as far as to explicitly praise the sacrifices involved in political life. "[T]he good person," he writes, "does a great deal for his friends and his country, and will die for them if he must; he will sacrifice money, honours, and in general the goods for which people compete, procuring for himself what is noble."⁴⁸ This passage suggests that living nobly and happily, at least in part, consists of service to one's country. Does Aristotle, then, represent an exception in ancient philosophy, somehow finding a way to show that political life is worthy of the wise man?

Despite the occasional evidence supporting this conclusion, it does not hold up in the context of Book X of the *Ethics*. It is here that Aristotle outlines the highest existence humanly possible, a life of contemplation. For many readers, Aristotle's recommendation that we should strive to be like gods, passing our lives in meditation, comes as a shock given the down-to-earth quality of Books I-IX. The conclusions reached in Book X seem aloof and disconnected from the rest of the ideas expressed in the *Ethics*. Due to the incongruity of Book X, those who prefer the Aristotle of Books I-IX are often reticent to accept its conclusions.

Although Book X does seem out of place, certain clues in the earlier books do hint at what is to come. Enquiring into what life is truly happy, Aristotle admits that certain people believe it to be a life in politics: "Sophisticated people, men of action, see happiness as honour, since honour is pretty much the end of the political life." But their conclusion strikes Aristotle as

⁴⁷ E.g., Nussbaum, 345-353.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a.

unsatisfactory: “Honour ... seems too shallow to be an object of our inquiry, since honour appears to depend more on those who honour than on the person honoured, whereas we surmise the good to be something of one’s own that cannot easily be taken away.”⁴⁹ Politics offers its practitioners goods, mostly honors of various sorts, yet they fall short of the highest goods. These goods are too easily lost and depend too much on others for them to serve as the goal of human existence. Aristotle feels compelled to look beyond the inferior goods of politics to something more certain, more meaningful—hence the conclusions of Book X.

The central message of Book X is that “the life in accordance with intellect is best ... pleasantest [and] happiest.”⁵⁰ Aristotle reasons that since the goods of intellect are more certain and more ultimate—that is, they do not lead to any higher goods—they constitute the end of human existence. In contrast, he finds that a life of virtuous activity towards others is only “happy in a secondary way.”⁵¹ Among virtuous activities, Aristotle singles out “those in politics and war,” writing that “they involve exertion, aim at some end, and are not worthy of choice for their own sake.”⁵² Lives characterized by these sorts of actions remain somewhat incomplete because they lack certain goods essential for human flourishing. To achieve “complete happiness,” one instead looks to a life of contemplation, whose pleasures are incomparably better than those of other activities.⁵³

As the end of human existence, intellect raises one almost to the level of a god. Indeed, according to Aristotle, intellect is the most divine element found in human beings.⁵⁴ By cultivating the intellect, a human being becomes like a god, whose existence consists entirely of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1095b.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1128a.

⁵¹ Ibid., 1178a.

⁵² Ibid., 1177b.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

contemplation. It would be foolish to believe that the gods do anything else, such as just, courageous, generous, or temperate acts. Since they are entirely independent, the gods have no reason to engage in virtuous activity with others. They reject such activity in favor of contemplation, achieving an existence that surpasses all others in happiness. Although no human being can ever attain this level of happiness, those who imitate the gods in their life come closest to it.⁵⁵ For this reason, Aristotle issues the following challenge: “We ought to ... take on immortality as much as possible, and do all that we can to live in accordance with the highest element within us; for even if its bulk is small, in its power and value it far exceeds everything.”⁵⁶ That means, of course, preferring contemplation over justice, courage, generosity, temperateness—in sum, those qualities essential to social and political life.

Aristotle also uses the *Politics* to further his belief that contemplation is superior to virtuous activity towards others. Specifically, his preference for monarchy⁵⁷—the form of government demanding the least involvement in public life—flows naturally from his affinity for a contemplative existence. Hans Kelsen convincingly argues this point in his article, “The Philosophy of Aristotle and the Hellenic-Macedonian Policy.”⁵⁸ Monarchical government requires little if no involvement of its citizens in government activities, thus allowing unfettered pursuit of intellectual endeavors. Such an environment suits quite well a philosopher like Aristotle, and it is easy to understand why he is attracted to it. Convinced of contemplation’s unrivaled superiority, he longs for a political system that least interferes with it. So though human beings need politics, Aristotle essentially argues that they are best off when it makes the least demands on them.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1178b.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1177b-1178a.

⁵⁷ Ibid., *The Politics*, 1284b, 1288a.

⁵⁸ Hans Kelsen, “The Philosophy of Aristotle and the Hellenic-Macedonian Policy,” *International Journal of Ethics* 48 (1937): 1-64; see also MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 99-100.

Having shown that Aristotle finds political action, and virtuous action in general, to be inferior to contemplation, the question remains whether such a conclusion is reconcilable with Books I-IX of the *Ethics*. This question has long been a source of debate among classicists and philosophers. A particularly persuasive account of the inconsistencies in the *Ethics* comes from J.L. Ackrill. Although Ackrill is unable to reconcile Books I-IX with Book X, he best explains why they *cannot* be reconciled. Ackrill recognizes that, for Aristotle, both virtuous and contemplative activities are good for their own sake. It therefore would be a mistake to believe that virtuous action is good only to the extent that it promotes contemplation. Another suggestion is that Aristotle understands contemplation and virtuous activity as commensurable with each other: an individual trades a little of the former for much of the latter and vice-versa. But as Ackrill points out, this solution also fails: “[H]ow can there be a trading relation between the divine and the merely human?”⁵⁹ By claiming that contemplation is incomparably superior to virtuous activity, Aristotle cannot reconcile the two without slipping into extremism. After all, “a man who really believed in the supreme importance of some absolute could not continue to live in much the same way as the others.”⁶⁰ Nowhere in Aristotle’s writings—or in philosophy in general, for that matter—does one find a way to overcome this obstacle.

The tension in Aristotle’s thought, then, never really goes away. One thing remains clear, however: Aristotle’s students in no way would take away from his lectures the message that they should throw themselves full-heartedly into political life and sacrifice their well-being for that of the state. It is true that there would be no doubt in their minds that politics provides certain goods. But rather than understanding them as goods to be sought out, they would see politics and everything it offers as necessities that human existence forces upon them. No one would go out

⁵⁹ J.L. Ackrill, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty, 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

of their way to obtain such inferior goods, yet that is what political life requires. Such a decision does not make sense because it would take them away from their true goal in life, philosophic contemplation. Political life may indeed offer an existence that is good to a secondary degree, but that begs the question: Why would anyone choose it over the *best* life? Suffice it to say, Aristotle's teachings are ill-suited for spurring political action among its adherents.

Like Plato, Aristotle ultimately rejects public life as a viable option for the wise man. The sacrifices required by public life prove unpalatable to both because they preclude the possibility of a happy, flourishing life. The politician misses out on the joys of contemplation—he is too busy frantically trying to meet the community's endless needs. And, making politics even less attractive, politics is rife with temptation, corruption, and criminality, all of which work together to destroy the virtue of even the strongest of characters. Faced with the dangers and sacrifices inherent in politics, the wise man invariably responds, "No thanks." Plato's and Aristotle's agreement on this point, in spite of their fundamental philosophical differences, suggests that self-sacrificing actions are problematic not only for certain ancient philosophers but for ancient philosophy in general. This shortcoming in ancient philosophy will become further evident as we turn to the dominant philosophical beliefs of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Epicurus and the Stoics

As a changing political and social environment gave way to new approaches in philosophy, the problem of public life still lingered. Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, most notably the Epicureans and the Stoics, followed Plato and Aristotle in taking up the issue of public life in their writings. And like their predecessors, they, too, failed to make a persuasive argument for the wise man to enter politics. Such inertia should not come as a surprise, given that the

inheritors of the Greek tradition kept the eudaimonistic framework intact, adding few innovations of their own. *Eudaimonia* remained the goal—a goal incompatible with self-sacrificing actions such as political service. The continued lack of viable solutions illustrates ancient philosophy’s inability to overcome the obstacles posed by political service.

The most outright and unapologetic rejection of public life in ancient thought came from Epicurus and his followers. Their rejection of politics flowed naturally from the basic principles of Epicureanism. The heart of Epicurus’ teaching is quite simple: minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Epicurus places the emphasis on the former of these tenets, because the discomfort of pain tends to outweigh the joys of pleasure. In fact, pursuing lofty pleasures often has the effect of plunging one into pain and distress. Pleasures requiring arduous work end up having a negative net effect on an individual’s well-being, and are to be avoided just as pains are. A simple life, then, without grand ambitions provides the individual with the largest possible share of *eudaimonia*. Here one finds “freedom of the soul from disturbance,” which for Epicurus constitutes “the goal of the blessed life.”⁶¹ Content with the pleasures well within their grasp, Epicurus and his followers delight in a tranquil existence.

Critics of Epicureanism have tended to peremptorily dismiss it “as a lazy-minded, shallow, pleasure-loving, immoral, or godless travesty of real philosophy.”⁶² In particular, they disparage its complete lack of concern for finding and cultivating a higher element in human beings—rather than be in the social, political, or spiritual realm. Whereas philosophers have the reputation of pushing human thought and action to new extremes, Epicurus counsels his disciples to content themselves with what is quotidian and easy. Whether Epicureanism’s modest goals merit criticism or not, it is important to recognize the tremendous appeal Epicureanism had in the

⁶¹ Diogenes Laertius, “Letter to Menoeceus,” in *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia*, ed. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994) 30.

⁶² D. S. Hutchinson, “Introduction,” in *The Epicurus Reader*, xv.

ancient world. The sect had a large number of adherents, with the vast majority of people remaining loyal after joining.⁶³ Epicureanism promised a concrete and attainable good—avoiding pain—and thus offered a practical approach to those seeking *eudaimonia*. As long as it resulted in the ultimate good of *eudaimonia*, which many followers of Epicurus could vouch for, it accomplished everything that one could ask of a philosophical system. The moral teachings of Epicurus represented a formidable position that no ancient opponent could take lightly.

Those anxious to reap the benefits of Epicurus' wisdom would learn quickly that, to realize a happy, flourishing existence, they must keep their distance from political life. Because of the dangers and worries rampant in politics, Epicurus counsels his disciples to eschew public life. According to one of his disciples, Epicurus says explicitly that the wise man will not “participate in civic life.”⁶⁴ Elsewhere he goes as far as to equate politics to a prison.⁶⁵ On Epicurus' view, it is an apt analogy: the enormous responsibilities of politics weigh down on the public servant and prevent him from partaking in the pleasures found in a simple life. Epicurus' stricture against political service appears to be absolute, although the following quotation raises the possibility of occasional exceptions: “[T]he wise man ... will serve a monarch, when the occasion is appropriate.”⁶⁶ In reality, however, this passage presents no serious challenge to his general denouncement of public life. After all, how often does an “appropriate” occasion—that is, one free from anxiety and exacting demands—present itself in politics? Such occasions are rare, and even when they do occur they involve too little effort to be able to effect change in the community. Epicureanism sides against the type of self-sacrificing action that governments need most urgently.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Report of Epicurus' Ethical Views*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, 43.

⁶⁵ *The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, 39.

⁶⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Report of Epicurus' Ethical Views*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, 43.

Epicureanism's unambiguous rejection of public life strikes some as an attack on the social and political order. Plutarch, for instance, decries the effects of Epicurus' teachings, saying that he urges his adherents "to avoid public life and express disgust for those who participate in it, abusing the earliest and wisest lawgivers and urging contempt for the laws, providing there is no fear of beatings and punishment."⁶⁷ Plutarch certainly exaggerates to make a point. It is doubtful that the disciples of Epicurus were as awful citizens as Plutarch makes them out to be. Nevertheless, Plutarch is correct in his characterization of Epicureanism as opposed to public service, as well as in his belief that such advice has potentially deleterious results for the community. If the wise man refuses to govern, the community is left with inferior rulers who screw things up either as a result of incompetence or more nefarious characteristics such as greed. It is essentially the same paradox that troubles Plato: the best ruler, the wise man, has no desire to rule.⁶⁸ Plutarch has reason to worry, for a lack of wise rulers renders government vulnerable to the corrupt and criminal elements of society.

Stoicism, Epicureanism's philosophic rival, ostensibly placed greater value on public service. The reason for this difference derives from the Stoics' emphasis on virtue, not pleasure, as the key element in the best life.⁶⁹ Whereas Epicurus rejects public service because it does not promote pleasure, the Stoics contend that service to the state constitutes an important part of virtuous activity. If this is the case, the wise man finally would have an incentive for going into politics. Yet, as even the Stoics reluctantly recognize, arguments attempting to reconcile public life with the quest for virtue fail to be persuasive; they inevitably turn out to be nothing more than smoke and mirrors. In the end, the Stoic philosopher shrinks from politics just as any good Epicurean would.

⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, in *The Epicurus Reader*, 80.

⁶⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 520d-521b.

⁶⁹ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 106.

Cicero, the Roman senator and Stoic philosopher, takes on the difficult task of showing that public service accords with a virtuous and excellent life. Drawing on his Stoic beliefs and Roman views on citizenship, Cicero formulates in *On Duties* one of the best known arguments for public life in antiquity. Stoicism's emphasis on the beneficial social effects of political action leads him to conclude that those who engage in politics "lead lives more profitable to mankind."⁷⁰ Cicero's claim that public life is "more suited to grandeur and fame"⁷¹ stems from his tremendous love, characteristic of a Roman, for glory and the patria. From these two beliefs, Cicero raises the state up as "the dearest thing" to the individual,⁷² joining together self-interest with the interests of the state. If the interests of the individual—i.e. virtue—coincide with the state's interests, it follows that serving the state is compatible with virtue. He drives home this point by continually repeating, "[W]hatever is honorable is beneficial,"⁷³ seemingly surprised that anyone could ever imagine a conflict between virtue and public service. "It turns out conveniently," Cicero writes, "that a situation could not arise where it would benefit the republic for ... a man to perform a [dishonorable] deed."⁷⁴ The state's well-being is the individual's primary concern, since a thriving state brings about personal happiness. Clearly, then, one serves one's country and always acts in its interests.

At the heart of Cicero's argument is a gross simplification, from which it cannot recover. Cicero portrays love of country as individuals' top priority, but this claim simply is untrue. Even for patriotic Romans, certain interests trump those of the state—namely, their desire for glory. The Romans loved their country and were eager to serve it precisely because it provided a means

⁷⁰ Cicero, *On Duties*, ed. M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 137.

⁷³ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 62.

to glory.⁷⁵ From this one cannot conclude, as does Cicero, that all actions benefiting the state are glorious. An example given by Cicero illustrates this point. He argues that a disgraceful act, such as dancing in the forum to raise money for the republic, is not disgraceful since it benefits the state.⁷⁶ One can imagine the response of a proud Roman: “Demeaning oneself to dance in public—*that’s* virtue?” Cicero’s argument is embarrassingly weak, and it is easy to see why. Regardless of the benefits one’s actions have for the state, if one ends up humiliated—the unavoidable result of lowering oneself to dance in public—the ancient paradigm cannot call such action virtuous. Virtue is the object of praise, not belittlement and insults.

Cicero’s argument encounters further difficulties when we consider the wise man’s response to it. From the wise man’s point of view, Cicero makes a problematical claim when speaking of the state as if it embodies the highest good. The state, a mere shadow of reality, pales in comparison to the higher goods of the soul. For a Stoic, these goods are found in the virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice.⁷⁷ At times one is able to cultivate these virtues in the service of the state, but only a fool would believe that political activity always yields these virtues. Indeed, we have seen that the general opinion among the ancients is that, more often than not, politics threatens rather than promotes one’s virtue. Because Cicero’s argument places material goods over those of the soul, the wise man will find it just as unsatisfactory as Thrasymachus’ argument. Cicero, like those who came before him, fails to give the wise man a compelling reason for political service.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Sallust writes, “[I]t almost passes belief what rapid progress was made by the whole state when once it gained its liberty; such was the desire for glory that had possessed men’s hearts.” What ultimately led to Rome’s advancement was not an altruistic love of state but a personal interest in glory. Sallust, *The Jugurthine War and the Conspiracy of Catiline*, trans. and ed. S.A. Handford (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 179.

⁷⁶ Cicero, 136.

⁷⁷ MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 106.

⁷⁸ John M. Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Seneca's piece "On the Private Life" exposes in a convincing manner the shortcomings in Cicero's argument. As with all the Stoics, Seneca values public service *per se*. Nevertheless, Seneca is at pains to stress Zeno's qualification for public action: one "will go into public life, *unless something interferes*."⁷⁹ In a manner reminiscent of Plato, Seneca draws attention to the moral perils rampant in politics. All governments, even those most admired, pose dangers to the wise man. Athens provides ample evidence for this point: in what was jewel of Greece, they killed Socrates, a harmless old man, out of envy. Problems also abound in the great city of Carthage, where cruelty and justice are ubiquitous. No matter where the wise man is, politics puts him in a treacherous position. Seneca thus reaches the fatalistic conclusion that the wise man will shun public service in all circumstances:

Were I to go through each commonwealth, I would not find one that could endure the wise man or be endured by him. But if no commonwealth is to be found of the kind that we imagine, retirement becomes a necessity for all wise men, because the one thing which could be preferred to retirement nowhere exists. If someone says that sailing is best and then says that you should not sail on a sea where shipwrecks regularly occur and there are often sudden storms to sweep the helmsman off course, he would be telling me, I think, not to weigh anchor.⁸⁰

The rough seas of politics are no place for the wise man.

Epicureanism and Stoicism represented new perspectives within the eudaimonistic framework. Once again, however, the ancient framework yielded the same result: public life proved incompatible with the wise man's existence. It is safe to say that we have found a pattern. Epicureanism's and Stoicism's inability to formulate a convincing argument for political action was yet another manifestation of *eudaimonia*'s incompatibility with self-sacrifice. As was true with their predecessors, this limit inherent in ancient moral thought constrained Epicurus and the Stoics in their philosophies.

⁷⁹ Seneca, "On the Private Life," in *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays*, trans. and ed. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (New York: Cambridge University press, 1995), 174 (emphasis added).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

A Solution from an Unlikely Source

If the wise man sat around and twiddled his thumbs while listening to the Greeks and Romans argue about politics, the message of a Jewish pacifist telling him to hate the world would appear unlikely to rouse him to action. This radical pacifist, of course, was Jesus, whose message would spread like few others in history. In its original form, Jesus' "good news" had little to do with politics. As a member of a marginalized group, Jesus lacked much of a reason to concern himself with political power; the Romans made sure they took care of that. It thus comes as a surprise that Jesus' message laid the groundwork from which later thinkers would formulate an argument for engaging in political action. The new ideal Jesus introduced—the Kingdom of God—would play a major role in finally convincing the wise man to jump into politics and endure its costs. It is a result few could have predicted.

The development towards a solution about political service began in the backwaters of Judea with Jesus proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God. This new concept, original to the sayings of Jesus, serves as the centerpiece of what most scholars agree to be, at its heart, an apocalyptic message.⁸¹ From what the Gospels tell us, Jesus warned that the current order was in its final death throes, after which would come the Kingdom of God. This kingdom to which Jesus pointed would exist not in heaven as many Christians believe today, but rather would revolutionize all aspects of *this* world—the oppressed would be set free, the crippled would walk, the blind would see, and the poor and weak would rule. There was no time to waste, for the Kingdom would be here at any moment.⁸² In one sweep it would wipe away the oppressive

⁸¹ See Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); for a survey of other interpretations of Jesus' intended meaning for the Kingdom of God, see "Kingdom of God: New Testament," in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 301-04.

⁸² Mark 9:1, 13:30, 14:62 New Revised Standard Version.

structures pervading society. To ensure that one was with the Kingdom and not against it at the decisive moment in history, Jesus urged constant preparation.

Since the Kingdom of God would turn everything on its head, preparation for it necessarily involved living in a way directly contrary to the ideals dominant in the world at the time. Honor, glory, wealth, military achievement—all of these supported a social system that the Kingdom of God sought to replace. One risked losing the Kingdom by pursuing these goods esteemed by society. Love of God and service to others, at times to the point of absolute annihilation, provided the only path to the Kingdom. For the true follower of Jesus, then, all else paled in comparison to those activities paving the way for the Kingdom. One's status vis-à-vis the rest of society should not matter because, simply put, it meant nothing. There were more important things to worry about, as Jesus tells his followers: "[d]o not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."⁸³ In the book of Mark, Jesus makes the same point about giving up the concerns of the world but in starker terms: "[W]hoever wants to save his life will destroy it, and whoever will destroy his life for my sake and the sake of the good news will save it."⁸⁴ Happiness in this world, the focus of the pagan philosophers, had to be left behind in favor of promoting the Kingdom. Because of its transcendent value, the Kingdom of God demanded one's total commitment, regardless of what the world offered.

Jesus' radical rejection of the world had direct implications for engagement in public life. Substantial portions of the Jesus movement saw his message, and understandably so, as leaving

⁸³ Matt. 6:25, 32-33 NRSV.

⁸⁴ Mark 8:35 NRSV.

little room for exercising earthly power and authority. The concerns of the world would bring believers down and take them away from God. One early group in particular, the Gnostics,⁸⁵ embodied this position. They interpreted Jesus' message as an offer of *gnosis* or secret knowledge, which would open the door to the divine. The material world provided nothing of the sort, and thus Gnostics sought to escape from it. They found themselves at odds with early church institutions closely tied to the local community and its earthly concerns. When the Church should have been leading people to *gnosis*, community problems were causing it to lose focus. Instead of throwing oneself wholly into the problems of the world, Gnostics recommended imitating the solitary seeker of truth, oblivious to the world and its endless distractions.⁸⁶

Although typically more open to public engagement than the Gnostics, those strands in Christianity that eventually became known as orthodox also tried to limit their worldly entanglements. Participating in local church institutions was one thing, collaborating with the powers that be another. One gave to Caesar what was Caesar's, but only so as to avoid having to deal with him and his cronies any more. Those that went further and directly participated in earthly institutions compromised the Kingdom of God's ideals. Political power relied on deception, greed, coercion, and violence—all behavior antithetical to the kingdom Jesus proclaimed. This kingdom celebrated groups ill-suited for political power, such as the meek, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.⁸⁷ Throw in Jesus' command to love one's enemies and turn the other cheek,⁸⁸ and it is easy to see why many Christians shied away from politics. On their view, the Kingdom's ideals were incompatible with the exercise of worldly power.

⁸⁵ For a summary of who the Gnostics were and their beliefs, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

⁸⁶ Pagels, 140-41, 145-48; Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 56-58.

⁸⁷ Matt. 5:5, 9-10 NRSV.

⁸⁸ Matt. 5:38-48 NRSV.

One of the early Church fathers, Tertullian, gave voice to Christian apprehensions about political engagement. In his writings, Tertullian targets, among other things, the morally dubious nature of military service. In formulating his argument against it, he does not have to construct radical reinterpretations of scripture; Christ's teachings give him all the ammunition he needs. "Shall a Christian," he asks, "be free to walk around in a sword, when the Lord has said that whoever takes the sword shall perish by the sword? ... Shall he administer chains and imprisonment and torture and punishment, though he will not even take vengeance for wrongs done himself? ... Shall he carry a banner in rivalry to Christ's?"⁸⁹ For all three questions, Tertullian answers with a resounding no. The question of military service is clear cut: if one takes the "decisive step of assuming military duties ... [t]he line is crossed in transferring one's name from the camp of light to the camp of darkness."⁹⁰ Military service is a grave sin,⁹¹ a pitfall in one's devotion to Christ. The broader implications of Tertullian's condemnation of military service are hard to miss. If bearing arms for the state is a sin, there is no justifiable reason to become involved in the machinery of the state, the massive organization behind military service and the violence it entails. For the Christian, then, the state and all that it embodies are diametrically opposed to one's walk with God.⁹² Tertullian captured the widespread view in Christian circles that the state was a tool of Satan and that devout Christians must steer clear of it in the interest of their soul.⁹³

⁸⁹ Tertullian, *The Military Chaplet*, in *From Iranaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100-1625*, eds., Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 28.

⁹² *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis*, trans. Gerald H. Rendall, Loeb Classical Library (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), XXXVIII, 3, quoted in Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 10.

⁹³ Deane, 7.

The uneasiness over political service expressed by Tertullian would remain an inescapable element of the Christian tradition. During the Renaissance, long after Christians began to occupy positions of power, the tension between Christianity and politics continued to be a matter of concern. One of the classic explorations of this problem in Christian thought is Thomas More's *Utopia*. In writing the book, More seems to have drawn his inspiration from Seneca's denouncement of politics in "On the Private Life."⁹⁴ The true Christian, like Seneca's wise man, avoids public service because of its perils. The lone exception for the virtuous Christian is the land of Utopia—literally "Nowhere"—that More describes in the book. Here the people live happily and justice rules. The virtuous participate in politics without fear, while only the wicked worry about their safety. The irony, of course, lies in the title *Utopia*: such a land does not exist.⁹⁵

Book I of *Utopia* offers an explanation of the dangers of politics, reminiscent of those of Plato and Seneca, only now in Christian form. The world traveler and philosopher, Hythloday, decries the governments of Europe, which stand in sharp contrast to Utopia's. War and conquest dominate the discussions of the courts of Europe, as kings scheme with their councilors over how to extend their dominion. The theme of conquest reappears when they turn to domestic matters. Finding methods to extract wealth from the people is far more important than looking out for their welfare. If, in such an environment, Hythloday tried to convince the king that the people's interests are more important than wealth or new lands, he would meet a fate similar to that of Plato's philosopher: "I'd be promptly thrown out, or merely treated as a figure of fun."⁹⁶ Given

⁹⁴ John M. Parrish, "A New Source for More's 'Utopia,'" *The Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 493-498.

⁹⁵ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*.

⁹⁶ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), 57.

the corrupt nature of government, Hythloday regrettably concludes that “there’s no room at Court for philosophy.”⁹⁷

The fictional Thomas More contends that Hythloday could introduce justice into the Court; he just would have to be tactful. But Hythloday refuses to give in. Being “tactful,” as More suggests, would go against Christian teachings and violate his conscience: “If we’re never to say anything that might be thought unconventional, for fear of its sounding ridiculous, we’ll have to hush up, even in a Christian country, practically everything that Christ taught. But that was the last thing he wanted.”⁹⁸ Moreover, regardless of how diplomatic one is, one still cannot hide one’s opinions at Court. Ultimately, “[y]ou have to give open support to deplorable policies, and subscribe to utterly monstrous resolutions.”⁹⁹ So the lone believer in justice inevitably ends up corrupt. There are no two ways about it, concludes Hythloday: “By associating with them you’ll either lose your own integrity, or else have it used to conceal their folly and wickedness.”¹⁰⁰ Only in Utopia—in other words, nowhere—can a Christian take part in politics.¹⁰¹

Echoing More’s doubts about Christianity’s compatibility with politics was his contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli shares many of Moore’s same concerns, but he approaches them in a radically different manner in his *Discourses on Livy*. In place of More’s despairing tone, Machiavelli unleashes a scathing attack against Christianity for what he sees as its deleterious effects on the state. He places the onus on Christianity for Europe’s inability to achieve the glory and greatness of his model state, republican Rome. Whenever Christians rule,

⁹⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics*.

the primary tenets of their faith—“humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human”¹⁰²—render them ineffectual in government. Christians stand in sharp contrast to the Romans, who, inured to brutality by their bloody and ferocious animal sacrifices, readily slaughtered for the nation. The nature of the Roman religion, in combination with the cultural importance of military glory, created an environment conducive to political action. Christianity’s emphasis on living peacefully and humbly has the opposite effect, creating men “capable more of suffering than of doing something strong.”¹⁰³ The result, writes Machiavelli, is disastrous for politics: “This mode of life ... seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them.”¹⁰⁴ Christians cannot effectively defend the state, let alone take the vigorous action necessary to lead it to greatness.

Machiavelli does make a feeble attempt to rehabilitate Christianity by saying that a misinterpretation of scripture lies at the root of its incompatibility with politics. Yet, as a simple reading of the Gospels makes clear, Machiavelli faces an impossible challenge in making this argument. Machiavelli wants to shift the focus to the Old Testament, which he believes to be capable of reconciling one’s love of God with one’s love of country, as the Roman religion was able to do. There is some truth to this claim. The Hebrews were far more comfortable with killing for the nation than was any hero of the New Testament. Since they believed that God had entrusted their land to them, they were willing to defend it at all costs. But the obvious problem for Machiavelli is that he simply cannot disregard the New Testament. Jesus’ teachings on mercy, humility, love, and peace are arguably the most basic elements of Christianity. To ask

¹⁰² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), II, 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Christians to jettison these beliefs is to ask them to reject Christianity altogether. Unable to part with these beliefs, Christianity was at an impasse.

Given the concerns of thinkers as diverse as Tertullian and Machiavelli, the Kingdom of God seemed to be an ideal ill-suited for encouraging political action. The pacifist elements scattered throughout Jesus' message made political action a morally dubious choice. The new moral ideal offered by Jesus, however, did have one thing working for it with regards to politics. For pagan philosophers, the primary obstacle standing in the way of political service was that it took away from one's happiness on earth. Jesus the apocalyptic preacher, on the other hand, urged his followers to care nothing for this world, even to go as far as destroying their life. Politics' negative consequences on earthly happiness were thus no longer a problem for the Christian.

The problem for Christians rather was its effects on their well-being in relation to the Kingdom of God. The corruption and violence inherent in politics presented a grave threat to the Christian's soul. Unsurprisingly, early Christianity for the most part took it for granted that one stays out of politics. Since few Christians had access to politics, it was an easy decision to make. Constantine's conversion in the 4th century CE, however, changed the problem entirely, forcing Christians to reevaluate their position on public service. Instead of using them as torches for his banquets,¹⁰⁵ Caesar now was holding power out to them. Some Christians saw in this offer the opportunity to further the program of social change outlined by Jesus—"to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹⁰⁶ Showing that political service could indeed advance the Kingdom turned out to be arguably the most important achievement in

¹⁰⁵ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 365.

¹⁰⁶ Luke 4:18, 19 NRSV.

Christian political thought. We turn next to the writings of the figure primarily responsible for this achievement, namely, the African Bishop Saint Augustine.

Augustine's Reconciliation of the Two Cities

To best understand Augustine's views on politics, one first has to understand the man and the context in which he lived. As the bishop of Hippo, Augustine was a leader in his community. He dealt both with the spiritual and earthly problems of his flock, and in fact the two were intricately intertwined with each other. His duty was to care for those in his community, whether that involved an earthly matter such as poverty, a heavenly matter such as baptism, or a less clear-cut matter such as war or death. In sum, he operated comfortably within both the heavenly and earthly cities.

Simply fleeing from the world therefore was not an option for Augustine. His position as bishop forced him to throw himself fully into the problems of the world, a point that comes out again and again in his letters. For example, in one letter he urged his fellow church leaders to act immediately to put a stop to a grisly slave trade wrecking havoc in their communities. Slave traders were descending on the African coast, where they would abduct members of the local population to sell overseas. Augustine insisted that the Church do everything in its power to help these unfortunate victims because, if it did not help, no one would.¹⁰⁷ In another instance, Augustine went beyond the institutions of the Church to petition a military commander by the name of Boniface for help. At the time, Africa was under the very real threat of a Vandal invasion. The dire security situation led Augustine to take the unlikely step of persuading Boniface, who was considering joining a monastery, to remain in his military post. The death of

¹⁰⁷ Augustine, "Letter 10," in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43-47.

his wife, a pious Catholic, had stirred in Boniface a desire to dedicate his life wholly to God. It was a noble desire, but Augustine, ever the realist, convinced him that at the moment God most needed him to defend the churches of Northern Africa.¹⁰⁸ Augustine earlier had assured him that his military exploits could serve the Lord, going so far as to make the claim—one that must have made Tertullian turn in his grave—that “one who serves as a soldier, using arms for warfare, can be acceptable to God.”¹⁰⁹ Far from shying away from the affairs of the world, Augustine was up to his elbows in them.

The pressing concerns endemic to Augustine’s responsibilities as bishop provided him with an acute insight into the relationship between heavenly and earthly matters. Augustine was thus ideally positioned to examine the role earthly actions, such as political service, play in the broader scheme of serving God. He tackles this project in his masterpiece, the *City of God*—“a book,” in the words of the eminent Augustine biographer Peter Brown, “about being other-worldly in the world.”¹¹⁰ The goal of the book is to investigate what sort of relationship a Christian should have vis-à-vis the world. Driving much of Augustine’s thinking on this subject is Jesus’ concept of the Kingdom of God. For Augustine, Jesus’ ideal kingdom becomes the city of God or the heavenly city. But despite the changes in terminology, the basic features of the Kingdom of God remain. Augustine’s heavenly city is not a wholly other-worldly phenomenon, but exists in part on earth through the true Church. This firm link between the two cities allows the heavenly city to serve as a guide to earthly actions. From this foundation Augustine shows that, because of their consequences for the heavenly city, Christians have a reason to take on the problems and sacrifices arising in the earthly city—even in the controversial sphere of the state.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., “Letter 220,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, 219-20; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 425-27.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, “Letter 189,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, 216.

¹¹⁰ Brown, 324.

Augustine locates the link between the two cities squarely in Jesus' summary of the law: love your God and love your neighbor.¹¹¹ More than anyone before him, Augustine puts special emphasis on these two commandments.¹¹² These commandments have the effect of linking the two cities together in a way that the sharp divisions between them begin to become blurred. The first command, love your God, primarily concerns the heavenly city; and the second, love your neighbor, primarily concerns the earthly city. Yet at the same time the focus of the two commands merge into one since serving others on earth glorifies God in heaven. As the foundation for the Kingdom of God, Jesus' summary of the law brings out an important aspect of this kingdom: earthly matters have heavenly consequences. With this relation in mind, Augustine sees no reason to deprecate the affairs of the world as necessarily opposed or irrelevant to the heavenly city.

In addition to establishing the connection between the two cities, Augustine further lays the foundation for his argument by discussing the purpose of the heavenly and earthly cities. For Augustine, both cities seek out peace above all else.¹¹³ Although Jesus did not put it in exactly these terms, his description of the Kingdom of God implies as much. His entire program sought to end people's suffering—in other words, to bring peace.¹¹⁴ The peace we seek, on Augustine's view, comes in a heavenly form and an earthly form. Heavenly peace is without doubt superior, as only it is capable of bringing about true contentment. But earthly peace still has an important role, since it facilitates Christian's quest for heavenly peace. The distant goal of heavenly peace naturally becomes less prominent in one's mind when constantly eluding death or searching for

¹¹¹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), XIX, 14.

¹¹² Oliver O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Yale University, 1980), 4.

¹¹³ Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 12.

¹¹⁴ For more on Jesus' societal aims, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994).

basic necessities. The benefits of earthly peace do not end there, however. Beyond creating an environment conducive for seeking heavenly peace, the advancement of earthly peace has internal goods of its own, such as providing a small taste of the ultimate goal. Those committed to Christ's teachings continually draw closer to heavenly peace in their efforts to bring peace on earth to the oppressed. In Augustine's words, that part of the heavenly city on earthly pilgrimage "lives a life of righteousness ... having the attainment of [heavenly peace] in view in every good action it performs in relation to God, and in relation to a neighbor."¹¹⁵ With every act of service one furthers the cause of peace and, more generally, the Kingdom of God whose end is peace.

Because of earthly peace's importance for the Kingdom of God, political action provides a legitimate opportunity to serve it. Governments have at their disposal the tools most essential for achieving peace. Preventing foreign invasion is the most obvious way for a government to provide peace, but other ways include protecting the poor and resolving disputes in a just manner. For peace ends not only with foreign invasion; rather it ends whenever the vicissitudes of life plunge individuals into misery and prevent them from meeting their most basic needs. Recognizing government's power to resolve these problems in a positive manner, Augustine concludes that government can be a force for good, which in turn leads to the conclusion that Christianity and politics are indeed compatible with each other.

Augustine sees room for Christians to work in public life, but only under the condition that their motives are pure. Unlike the Thrasymachuses of the world, true Christians do not seek out public office for the honor and power it provides. These earthly goods are only means to achieving the higher goal of promoting "the well-being of the common people." Christians have good reason to advance this goal, on Augustine's view, since it "is according to God's

¹¹⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 17.

intention.”¹¹⁶ Christians, then, can serve God in politics as long as they pursue his aim of caring for the welfare of others. The conscientious Christian now has a reason to enter politics—no small feat on Augustine’s part.

Still, certain obstacles stand in the way of a full justification of public service. The most obvious challenge to Augustine’s argument is Christ’s command to react to turn the other cheek in the face of violence. Political service may help others in one’s community, as Augustine argues, but that does not make the Sermon on the Mount go away. Any Christian contemplating political service will have to confront the question: Can I honestly remain faithful to Christ’s message while bearing the sword—a necessary element of politics?

Although Augustine does not take up this question in the *City of God*, it does come up in other places in his writings. In Augustine’s correspondence, his friend Marcellinus, a high ranking Roman official, forces him to address the uneasy relation between Christianity and violence. Marcellinus is concerned that Christ’s command to turn the other cheek prevents Christians from being able to take the sorts of actions necessary to be a good citizen. Because of their emphasis on justice, the ethics of citizenship condemn those who “allow an enemy to steal something from him,” as well as those “unwilling to inflict evil, in the form of just war, as recompense for the ravaging of a Roman province.”¹¹⁷ It is this sort of passivity in the face of evil that seems to flow naturally from Christian beliefs. As both a military man and a Christian, Marcellinus has reason for concern.

In his response to Marcellinus, Augustine says that the command to turn the other cheek is to be interpreted figuratively. Correction would be impossible if one literally interpreted Christ’s teachings as a ban on inflicting harm in all cases. Augustine finds such an interpretation

¹¹⁶ Ibid., XIX, 19.

¹¹⁷ Marcellinus, “Letter 136,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, 29.

problematical because helping others often involves an element of correction. The more figurative interpretation he opts for eliminates this difficulty by equating “turning the other cheek” with having benevolence in one’s heart. According to this interpretation, even actions in which “we return evil for evil” are pleasing to God as long as benevolence guides us.¹¹⁸ More than simply demonstrating the compatibility between Christianity and citizenship, Augustine’s figurative interpretation of Jesus’ command opens the door for a justification of war: “If the earthly commonwealth observes Christian precepts in this way, then even wars will be waged in a spirit of benevolence; their aim will be to serve the defeated more easily by securing a peaceful society that is pious and just. For if defeat deprives the beaten side of the freedom to act wickedly, it benefits them.”¹¹⁹ Marcellinus’ worries turn out to be unfounded. Christians are well suited for the responsibilities of citizenship, as they even participate in war when circumstances demand it.

Augustine explores in greater detail the tension, both believed and imagined, between Christianity and violence in the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*. Here a fictional Augustine and his interlocutor Evodius discuss what makes returning violence for violence problematical. Despite the pain violence causes, it only deprives one of temporal goods. Such goods are perishable and thus vastly inferior to those that are eternal (later determined to be a good will and the cardinal virtues of which it consists).¹²⁰ By defending oneself against the loss of perishable goods, one shows an “inordinate desire” for such goods. Of course, the temporal law will never condemn someone for acting in self-defense, but that is beside the point. The fictional Augustine and Evodius want to know what the *eternal* law commands. Since this higher law commands

¹¹⁸ Augustine, “Letter 138,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, 38.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), I, 12, 13.

devotion to eternal goods, both find self-defense at odds with it. Evodius asks, “How can [individuals acting in self-defense] be free of sin in the eyes of that law, when they are defiled with human blood for the sake of things that ought to be held in contempt?”¹²¹ The fictional Augustine generally agrees, adding the qualification that self-defense may be permissible in cases in which the reason for protecting perishable goods is their ability to advance eternal goods.¹²² But, even with this qualification, the conclusion of the dialogue is that those acting in self-defense typically are too attached to temporal goods and thus fall short of the standards of eternal law.

This conclusion gives the initial impression that any justification for politics rests on shaky ground. If simply defending oneself is rarely justifiable, the government’s job of defending a large group of people must be out of the question. Augustine finds this conclusion to be mistaken, however. Inordinate desire for temporal goods—the indefensible motive behind self-defense—does not motivate the public official. Instead, the public official punishes wrongdoing out of obedience to the law. “A soldier who kills the enemy,” points out Evodius, “is acting as an agent of the law, so he can easily perform his duty without inordinate desire.... The same can be said of all officials who by lawful order are subject to some higher power.”¹²³ In what appears to be concern for others’ temporal goods, the public official’s focus is in reality on advancing the eternal good of justice. Self-defense and public service are therefore entirely different matters. Those acting in self-defense lose sight of the proper goal of human action, eternal goods. Those defending the state from injustice, on the other hand, advance these higher goods, and thus their actions accord with the basic thrust of Christianity.

¹²¹ Ibid., I, 5.

¹²² Ibid., I, 5, 15.

¹²³ Ibid.

Augustine answers the challenges raised by the Sermon on the Mount, yet another formidable obstacle remains: the worry that politics corrupts and destroys. When answering concerns about the use of force, Augustine shows where his opponents' are misguided in their thinking. Such an approach will not work against concerns about politics' corruptive influence. Temptations and dangers are rampant in politics. Christians venturing into this suspect world *do* put their virtue at risk. Many therefore opt for avoiding these dangers altogether by limiting their service to others to the private sphere. Why take the risk?

Augustine openly admits that public life poses hazards to one's well-being. He is under no illusions that such a life is easy, especially given his familiarity with Roman history and its long record of political corruption. Politics not only threatens the body and soul of public officials, but it also forces upon them problems that prove too great for the limited capacities of faulty human intelligence. Officials are blind to the true intentions behind actions, and thus are always imperfect in their judgment. Mistakes are unavoidable and often result in harm to the innocent. Augustine gives the example of a judge compelled to torture the innocent in his search for truth. Although current views on torture widely differ from those of Augustine, his basic point remains true: man's ignorance leaves him in an impossible situation. "[T]he wise judge," he writes, "does not [condemn and torture the innocent] through a will to do harm, but because ignorance is unavoidable—and yet the exigencies of human society make judgment also unavoidable. Here we have what I call the wretchedness of man's situation."¹²⁴ The inescapable ignorance of the human condition, along with the inherent dangers of politics, renders public life unattractive.

Nevertheless, the pitfalls of public life in no way take away from its ability to advance the Kingdom of God—a point that Augustine steadfastly defends. In many cases the needs of

¹²⁴ Ibid., *City of God*, XIX, 6.

others compel the Christian to overcome personal misgivings about politics and enter public life. Augustine paints just such a scenario: “In view of this darkness that attends the life of human society, will [a] wise man take his seat on the judge’s bench, or will he not have the heart to do so? Obviously, he will sit; for the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty; and it is unthinkable to him that he should shirk it.”¹²⁵ Serving the community and, in effect, the Kingdom of God demands personal sacrifices. Public service provides no personal benefits but instead is a source of constant torment. Faced with the obligation of exercising public authority without the divine wisdom it requires, the Christian official “cries out to God, ‘Deliver me from my necessities!’”¹²⁶ But, as did Christ, he humbly bears the cup placed before him. Augustine’s wise man sacrifices for the sake of the public good, neglecting personal desires in pursuit of something higher—the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Between the glory days of ancient Athens and the ignominious fall of the Roman Empire, the wise man’s attitudes towards politics underwent a transformation. Plato’s and Aristotle’s archetypical wise man shunned public serve. He knew better than to risk his body and soul in an activity that offered him absolutely nothing of value. Yet conceptions began to change with the arrival of Christianity. The change was by no means immediate, but with time politics became a real option for the wise man. Instead of offering nothing, politics offered that which surpassed all else in value—an opportunity to advance the Kingdom of God.

That Christianity preceded changing views towards politics is no mere coincidence. Christianity introduced the Kingdom of God as a new moral ideal. This other-worldly goal

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

dethroned earthly happiness as the ultimate goal of moral action, providing more of a reason to make sacrifices on this earth. Augustine's wise man decided to enter politics and endure its hardships because a higher goal demanded it. To be sure, altruism was still a ways off. Self-love remained the driving force behind the wise man's actions, only now it was grounded in heavenly instead of earthly goods. Nevertheless, this change in focus was important, for it revolutionized how people thought about morality, most notably with regards to the value of sacrifice. Though not altruism, it was a step in that direction.

Part II

Self-Love's Fall from Grace:

How Normative Altruism Developed out of the Augustinian Tradition

“To punish man for original sin, God has let him turn his self-love into a god to torment him in every act of his life.”

— La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, 509

Christianity never was content with one's outward actions. On the Christian view, the most essential part of serving the Lord is the condition of one's heart. Hence Jesus' commandment to avoid not only the obvious sins of murder and adultery but also sins of the heart, such as hate and lust.¹ Out of these teachings grew the Christian tradition's obsession with evaluating motivations. Even outwardly beneficial actions had to be put under the microscope, for a sinister motive could disguise itself in any number of ways. The standard criterion for judging an action's worth was whether earthly or heavenly goods constituted its ultimate end. Only the pursuit of heavenly goods was compatible with true Christianity. The pursuit of earthly goods was dangerous for Christians because it elevated base objects above the proper end of all actions, the Kingdom of God. Such motives were unquestionably bad, and Christian thinkers saw little reason to debate this point.

A more difficult issue to resolve concerning motivations was figuring out self-love's role, if any, for the believer. Some forms of self-love were clearly out of the question, such as the desire to increase one's earthly well-being through wealth, honor, sensual pleasure, or similar sordid pursuits. Still, a more subtle form of self-love confronted the conscientious Christian: the desire to increase one's heavenly well-being. Although clearly superior to the self-love of non-believers, this form of self-love bothered many Christian thinkers. By seeking heavenly well-being, one's own interests take precedence over love of God, which becomes a mere means to attaining future happiness. The French Catholic Archbishop François de Salignac de la Mothe-

¹ Matt. 5:21-30 NRSV.

Fénelon expresses this concern in his *Maxims of the Saints*. Fénelon recognizes that God's offer of transcendent happiness motivates many Christians. "This is well," he writes, "but there is something better. Such Christians are inferior to those who forget the nothingness of the creature in the infinitude of the Creator, and love God for His own glory alone."² Fénelon certainly makes a point, but his attempt to establish a pure love of God, disconnected from all forms of self-interest, exists in tension with fundamental Christian beliefs. References to heaven litter the scriptures, which rarely come with reservations about it serving as a source of motivation. It was, after all, Jesus himself who said "store up for yourself treasures in heaven."³

Heavenly rewards were simply too central to Christianity for it ever to achieve a coherent account of altruism. The best it could do was to disparage the diverse and sundry forms of earthly self-love, while at the same time carving out a respectable niche for heavenly self-love. This approach to self-love especially comes out in the writings of Augustine, who through his influence on the Protestant Reformation was able to shape theological and moral beliefs like few others in history. Augustine portrayed human nature as fallen and corrupt, God's grace being its only hope for righteous action and happiness. By characterizing human nature in such negative terms, Augustine set the stage for the rise of normative altruism more than a millennium after his death. When religious wars and growing secularism weakened Europeans' beliefs in God's providence, Enlightenment thinkers felt pressured to justify morality in terms other than as the path to eternal communion with God. They dropped Augustine's incentive for moral action, yet many continued to hold onto his despairing view of human nature. So though they saw themselves as moving away from Augustine, this giant in Western thought still controlled the direction of the debate. Their very Augustinian belief that human desires were unsuitable as a

² François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, "Maxims of the Saints," in *The Best of Fénelon*, ed. Harold Chadwick (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2002), 16.

³ Matt. 6:20 NRSV.

basis for morality led to one of two conclusions: either (1) that we should forget about traditional morality's emphasis on pure motives because the corruptness of human nature makes them unattainable;⁴ or (2) that we should look for a new objective standard, independent of human nature, to ground traditional moral beliefs in the importance of pure motives. It was this latter approach, embodied in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which became the basis for normative arguments for altruism.

Entangled in Self-love: Augustine's Normative Argument

Any passing familiarity with Augustine's writings dispels any illusions that there is an altruistic bent to his thought. His works are brimming with references about how the greatest happiness lies in serving God. Even his justification for political service, outlined in Part I, does not rely on altruism. Certainly the Christian politician has to make sacrifices in the present, but they will pay off in the end in the form of heavenly rewards. The benefits of an action are never far from Augustine's mind because, like his Greek and Roman predecessors, he is a eudaimonist. He carries on the ancient moral tradition of arguing that morality consists of those actions leading to happiness. He does add a new twist, however: happiness now has an otherworldly quality to it. Happiness on earth, the focus of the pagan philosophers, no longer frames moral discourse. In fact, those self-lovers who seek earthly happiness *per se* are depraved. The goal now is heavenly happiness, which consequently changes arguments about morality. To justify the moral value of obeying the Lord, Augustine points to the incredible heavenly happiness that it promises. The

⁴ Parrish, "Two Cities and Two Loves: Imitation in Augustine's Moral Psychology and Political Theory," *History of Political Thought* 26 (2005): 235.

following quote from *The Trinity* succinctly captures his normative argument: “[I]f you cling to [God] in love, you will straightaway enter into bliss.”⁵

Augustine finds it necessary to relocate the goal of moral action because, on his view, the approach of pagan philosophers is bound to fail. He begins from the premise that happiness requires wishing well and being able to fulfill one’s wishes.⁶ Due to past philosophers’ focus on earthly happiness, they encounter intractable difficulties in producing an account of moral life capable of meeting one’s desires to be happy. It is absurd, Augustine argues, for them to promise happiness when mortality necessarily prevents human beings from realizing their fundamental desire of continuing in a happy life.⁷ Perhaps pagan philosophers’ accounts of morality could provide temporary happiness, but nothing more. True happiness is found only in eternal life, since anything less results in unfulfilled desires. This move allows Augustine to introduce faith in Christ as essential for attaining happiness. Christianity’s offer of eternal communion with God means that one’s happiness never comes to an end, and thus it has the sole claim to true happiness. Christian faith succeeds where pagan philosophy failed by taking away the never-ending longing characteristic of life and replacing it with a sense contentment.

The role that faith plays in Augustine’s account of happiness helps him to explain all the unhappiness in the world. A basic fact of Augustinian psychology is that everyone wishes to be happy.⁸ Yet if this is the case, why do so many people fall dreadfully short of their goal? For Augustine, the reason lies in people’s lack of faith. “All men have the will to be happy,” he writes, “but not all have the faith which must purify the heart if happiness is to be reached.”⁹

⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (United States: New City Press, 1991), VIII, 2.

⁶ Ibid., XIII, 2, 4.

⁷ Ibid., XIII, 3.

⁸ Ibid., *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), I, 48, 57; *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), X, 21; *On Free Choice of the Will*, I, 14; *The Trinity*, VIII, 2, XIII, 2.

⁹ Ibid., *The Trinity*, XIII, 6.

Without this purifying faith, corrupt desires and despair about human mortality keep true happiness out of reach. The goal—happiness—is the same for everybody, but it is accessible only to those who trust in the Lord.

Although faith is the first step to happiness, Augustine rejects the notion that it instantaneously brings about a happy existence. Upon accepting faith, the believer embarks on a long and arduous journey in which she gradually works towards transforming her life into one pleasing to God—with, of course, the help of grace. Augustine’s normative argument, then, is incomplete as it stands. Augustine has shown that true happiness is possible only through faith and the guarantee of eternal life, but he has yet to establish the connection between happiness and the version of faith that he urges his reader to adopt. Taking this further step of spelling out how exactly we get from faith to happiness is essential for justifying his argument within a eudaimonist framework.

The link between faith and happiness, Augustine argues, lies in properly ordering one’s desires. If, by grace, one possesses true faith, this commitment to Christ will lead to the purification of one’s desires. Such purification is necessary because, as they stand, human desires are corrupt along with the rest of human beings’ fallen nature. The goal is to leave behind these base desires and arrive at a constellation of desires pleasing to God. With such purified desires, holy actions will become natural, bringing one closer to eternal bliss. As for the content of righteous desires, the matter is straightforward on Augustine’s view: righteous desires invariably put heavenly things above earthly things. “I am not saying that you should have no loves,” Augustine tells his congregation. “I simply want your loves to be properly ordered. Put heavenly things before earthly, immortal things before mortal, everlasting things before transitory ones.

And put the Lord before everything, and not just by praising him, but also by loving him.”¹⁰ By loving God above all else, the believer realizes her true interests. Or, as Augustine likes to put it, “we love ourselves all the more, the more we love God.”¹¹ Augustine essentially urges his readers to adopt the proper approach to realizing self-love. He thinks this approach to be the only viable one, since the pursuit of happiness—in other words, self-love—is an inescapable part of being human.

The majority of individuals, as Augustine is quick to point out, do not properly order their desires by putting God before everything. Instead, they usually follow their given desires, which lead them away from the universal goal of happiness. As a result, the paradox arises in which people think that they are pursuing happiness when in reality they are inflicting incredible harm on their interests. This paradox captures Augustine’s attention, and he rarely tires of driving the point home to his reader. Unsurprisingly, one of Augustine’s favorite verses is Psalms 10:6, which says that “the person who loves injustice hates his own soul.”¹² He develops the idea that this verse embodies in *The Trinity*:

[T]he man who does not love God, even though he loves himself, which is innate in him by nature, can still be said quite reasonably to hate himself when he does what is against his own interest, and stalks himself as if he were his own enemy. It is indeed a dreadful derangement that while everyone wants to do himself good, many people do nothing but what is absolutely destructive of themselves.¹³

Our initial impulsion towards desiring happiness is completely natural and by no means wrong according to Augustinian psychology. The problems begin, rather, when an individual blindly follows her corrupted desires in the hope of achieving happiness. Normally she is unaware that

¹⁰ Ibid., “Sermon 335c,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro, 59.

¹¹ Ibid., *The Trinity*, VIII, 5; see also *City of God*, X, 3.

¹² See, e.g., ibid., *On Christian Teaching*, I, 46.

¹³ Ibid., *The Trinity*, XIV, 4.

she takes herself farther and farther away from intended goal. To avoid such a fate, “human beings must be told how to love, that is, how to love themselves so as to do themselves good.”¹⁴

This knowledge of how to properly order desires proves absolutely necessary for the pursuit of happiness because desires are naturally corrupt in humanity’s fallen state.

Consequently, individuals tend towards the specter of happiness rather than true happiness. The false happiness that people seek out can take many forms, but invariably at its base is pride.

Pride raises oneself above God in a perverse attempt to achieve happiness. The thought, so natural for fallen man, is that taking pleasure in one’s imagined greatness satisfies one’s continual longing for happiness. Yet the result could not be more to the contrary. Pride, the ultimate affront to God’s authority, always fails to achieve its goal because, as human beings, our greatness pales in comparison to the divine. Inevitably, by exalting ourselves we end up looking foolish. As Augustine writes in *On Free Choice of the Will*, “If someone ... takes pleasure in himself and wills to enjoy his own power in a perverse imitation of God, he becomes more and more insignificant as he desires to become greater. This is ‘pride, the beginning of all sin.’”¹⁵

Augustine finds it impossible to overstate the pernicious effects of pride, since on his view the vice led to Adam’s fall and the subsequent corruption of all of humanity. Originally, man’s will and desires were pure, as they were guided by the love of God. The turning point came when man exalted himself by turning away from God and rejecting his dependence on him. This act of pride had the contrary effect than that desired, Augustine argues: “when [Adam] had turned towards himself his being was less real than when he adhered to him who exists in a

¹⁴ Ibid., *On Christian Teaching*, I, 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., *On Free Choice of the Will*, III, 25; see also *The Trinity*, XII, 3.

supreme being.”¹⁶ Once again, Augustine seizes on the paradox that love of self, when not specifically guided by love of God, leads to the destruction of the self.

So far, Augustine’s argument is relatively easy to follow: we should avoid the pitfall of pride and cling to God, since if left to our own corrupt desires happiness will forever elude us. His argumentative strategy is thoroughly eudaimonist in nature—the promise of happiness serves as the primary motivating factor for acting on his counsels. The argument, however, becomes somewhat messy when Augustine’s condemnation of pride becomes conflated into a condemnation of self-love. To be sure, pride represents an improper form of self-love, and from his condemnation of pride it follows that certain manifestations of self-love are sinful. But Augustine is not always clear on this point. In fact, at times he equates pride with self-love, without qualifying the latter.¹⁷ One example comes in Augustine’s discussion of Adam’s downfall. Here he calls the proud “self-pleasers,”¹⁸ a term essentially synonymous with self-lovers. Rather than attacking a specific form of self-love, he seems to be attacking self-love *per se*. If Augustine is indeed making such a claim, it presents potentially insoluble problems for his argument in favor of the Christian faith. It is, after all, an essentially eudaimonist argument with self-love at its foundation.

The distinctive idea that self-love is essentially evil first appears in Augustine’s writings around 400 CE. It is at this time that he first equates self-love with the earthly city.¹⁹ Making a sharp distinction between the heavenly and earthly city, Augustine writes: “In one city love of God has been given first place, in the other, love of self.”²⁰ According to Oliver O’Donovan, author of *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, such a characterization of self-love

¹⁶ Ibid., *City of God*, XIV, 13.

¹⁷ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (Ann Arbor, MI: Yale University, 1980), 95.

¹⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV, 13.

¹⁹ Oliver O’Donovan, 93.

²⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV, 13; see also XIV, 28.

represents a novel view on the subject within the Christian tradition.²¹ Augustine is carving out in the field of philosophical and Christian thought a new position on self-love. The question remains whether he full-heartedly embraces this position or instead drifts into it in a somewhat careless manner.

Given Augustine's undeniable eudaimonist views, it is unlikely that he intends to condemn self-love absolutely. He certainly can come across this way when he argues that self-love only leads to the abasement of the self. These repeated references to the paradoxes of self-love exist in tension with and even directly contradict his eudaimonist views—namely, that we naturally seek out our own happiness and that there is nothing wrong with doing so *per se*. O'Donovan suggests a way of making sense of this tension in Augustine's thought. On his view, Augustine focuses on the paradoxes of self-love primarily for rhetorical effect.²² We thus should be cautious reading into Augustine's philosophy all of the implications following from paradoxical references to self-love. Considering Augustine's thought on the whole, it would be rash to conclude that he ever intends to denounce self-love in all its forms. After all, he often appeals to self-love, such as when he speaks of the eternal bliss promised to the righteous. O'Donovan's reading takes into account these diverse views of Augustine, and thus is the most plausible. It is Augustine's affinity for rhetorical flair that leads to an at times schizophrenic account of self-love.

But though it is unlikely that Augustine holds the view that self-love *per se* is sinful, various elements in his writings encourage, at least ostensibly, this interpretation. In particular, Augustine's despairing views about human nature fall in line with the view that there is something profoundly wrong about loving the self. After the Fall, the self's nature became

²¹ Oliver O'Donovan, 94.

²² Ibid., 105-111.

wretched and corrupt. If Augustine's portrayal of the self is accurate, it follows that there is little reason to love it. The logical response is rather a sense of repulsion to the self. Such a sentiment runs throughout Augustine's writings, and is especially pervasive in his *Confessions*. Here Augustine laments: "[H]ow sordid I was, how deformed and squalid, how tainted with ulcers and sores."²³ Suffice it to say, little about the human condition is worthy of love.

For Augustine, the self is in such a corrupted state that it takes on a dark, impenetrable quality. Human nature exists in a state of total corruption, which as a result casts doubt about the moral standing of all aspects of the self. Even outwardly praiseworthy acts may have, for all we know, sinful motives at their base. After all, Augustine asks, "How can we know or see that it be not pride which governs the good deed? Where is the proof? We see the works: hunger is fed by compassion, but also by pride; strangers are entertained by compassion but also by pride; poverty is protected by compassion, but also by pride. In the works themselves we can see no difference."²⁴ Essentially, no aspect of the self is beyond moral questioning. One cannot be sure of one's goodness because the depravity of sin infiltrates every aspect of one's being. The only epistemological certainty is one's depravity, not one's goodness. Within such an outlook, it is understandable why Augustine issues paradoxical exhortations such as, "Learn to love yourself by not loving yourself!"²⁵ Human beings' corrupt nature demands that they turn away from it, even hate it. This rejection of the self is necessary for arriving at complete faith in the Lord, whose grace provides the only hope of redemption. In a strict sense, disdain for the self can be construed as a radical form of self-love because it represents the path to eternal communion with God. Nonetheless, it is a peculiar form of self-love that borders on self-hatred.

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, 7.

²⁴ Ibid., *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of St. John*, in *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 8.9, quoted in Parrish, "Two Cities and Two Loves," 217.

²⁵ Ibid., *Sermo* 96.2, quoted in Oliver O'Donovan, 108.

Augustine's misgivings about self-love leave his eudaimonist argument on shaky ground. Any hint that self-love fails as a moral guide is out of place within a eudaimonist framework, as it threatens to bring down the entire normative framework. To be sure, Augustine himself never rejected eudaimonism. Largely influenced by the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, Augustine saw the eudaimonist approach as the only one available for justifying a moral position. Nevertheless, he clearly did more than simply operate within an existing framework: he altered it by portraying in greater nuance the concept of self-love, including many of its less desirable aspects. The questions Augustine raised about self-love went on to make a significant impact on the Christian tradition and moral philosophy more generally. Whereas pre-Christian philosophers could appeal unabashedly to self-love, thinkers after Augustine approached the issue more gingerly. Negative connotations towards self-love, first planted by Augustine, took hold and influenced debates about morality in both a conscious and unconscious manner. With time, these connotations grew, until finally reaching the point where self-love was seen as contrary to morality, rather than as a necessary part of it.

Augustine Goes Secular

If a certain German monk, paranoid about his salvation, had never issued his 95 theses in protest against the Catholic Church, Augustine's standing in Western thought still would have been assured. Ever since Augustine's death his works have been widely read. Nevertheless, the rise of Protestantism enlarged his sphere of influence in a dramatic way. Augustine, with his unflinching convictions about human corruption and the need for grace, was the darling of the Protestant movement. Seeing him as the one Church father whose theology got it right, Luther and other Protestants drew heavily on his writings when outlining their own position on

religious, moral, and political matters. As an essential part of the Protestant program, Augustine's views became a salient part of the debates occupying Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe.

It is ironic that Augustine's influence took off when it did, considering that during this period there was a general move away from the God-centered, medieval outlook that Augustine's thought epitomizes. Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers hoped to replace such an outlook with one that, though not necessarily excluding God, placed man at its center. Understandably, many saw as an obstacle to this project Augustine's despairing views on the human nature. To open the way for a society centered on human interests, these reformers needed to rehabilitate human nature, which meant leaving behind the Augustinian picture of it. Realizing this goal, however, turned out to be easier said than done. Augustine's views had insinuated themselves into moral thinking to such an extent that reformers in many cases found themselves unconsciously accepting them. This point is evident in their reluctance to associate self-love with morality. Even in the midst of growing secularism, then, Augustine's characterization of human nature as fallen and corrupt continued to shape views on self-love. The main difference now was that the new secular view could no longer guarantee the redemption of self-love.

Our starting point for examining Augustine's influence during the Enlightenment is 17th century France, where a splinter Catholic sect known as the Jansenists originated. Above all, the Jansenists dedicated themselves to living a holy life as spelled out by Augustine. Their practices and beliefs were so much in line with Augustine's thought that many opponents labeled them as Protestants in disguise. The Jansenists turned to Augustine teachings largely because they were fed up with the lax moral practices within the Catholic Church, especially among the Jesuits.²⁶

²⁶ See, e.g., Blaise Pascal's witty and forceful attacks on the Jesuits in *The Provincial Letters*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1967).

Augustine's emphasis on striving for purity in all aspects of life provided them with exactly the type of message they were looking for.

The Jansenists' concern with purity led them, like Augustine, to constant introspection of the self. Such introspection meant thinking hard about the role of self-love in living a moral life pleasing to God. The conclusions that the Jansenists put forward about self-love closely follow those of Augustine. With Augustine, they share the concern that corrupt self-love or cupidity infiltrates all of our actions. Blaise Pascal, the most well-known of the Jansenists, paints an especially bleak picture. "All men," he writes, "naturally hate each other. We have used concupiscence as best we can to make it serve the common good. But that is only pretence, and a false picture of charity."²⁷ The vilest of motives take the appearance of virtue so as to succeed within society. Often it is impossible to know whether pure or corrupt motives are at work, because "Nothing is so like charity as cupidity," even though in reality "nothing is so contrary."²⁸ The essential difference between the two is that "cupidity makes use of God and delights in the world, whereas charity does the opposite."²⁹ Here Pascal directly draws on a distinction made by Augustine, which says that eternal things are to be enjoyed and earthly things used.³⁰ By understanding charity as "delight" in heavenly things, Pascal and the Jansenists are still operating within Augustine's eudaimonistic framework. Pascal's wager further demonstrates this point: bet on God, for only he can promise infinite happiness in the form of eternal life.³¹

One tension in Jansenist thought is that, while urging others to adopt charity, it admits that cupidity or depraved self-love operates just as well in achieving social harmony. The

²⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), XVII, 243.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, XXXIV, 508.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, LXI.

³⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I, 39.

³¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, XLV.

thought ultimately has its basis in Augustine, as we have already seen.³² The Jansenist Pierre Nicole seizes on this Augustinian idea in his essay, “Of Charity and Self-Love.” In it he explains how amazingly effective self-love is in attaining all the things that human beings value in this world. Although one might think that self-love gives way to fierce competition and social chaos, in reality it leads to the most perfect social harmony. Individuals realize their weakness and their consequent inability to realize their desire to dominate others. They thus cooperate, as it is the surest way to hang onto “the comforts of life.”³³ Through the economic security generated by trade, self-love ensures that one lives as “peacefully, safely, and comfortably as if one were in a republic of saints.”³⁴ If one by any chance is still not convinced of self-love’s benefits, Nicole goes on to show that it conduces to loyalty, kindness towards one’s enemies, and even “actions designed to mortify and destroy it.”³⁵

When reading the essay, one is almost tempted to embrace self-love, given how beneficial its effects are. Nicole, however, warns against falling victim to this view. The real nature of self-love is hideous: “This tyrannical disposition, being firmly implanted deep in the hearts of all men, makes them violent, unjust, cruel, ambitious, obsequious, envious, insolent, and quarrelsome. In a word, it carries within the seeds of all men’s crime’s and profligacies, from the slightest to the most heinous. This is the monster we carry in our bosom.”³⁶ It is this monster actuating society and all its parts, which is why the Jansenists want to retreat from society’s false virtue to a life of righteousness.

³² See p. 74 above, as well as Parrish, “Two Cities and Two Loves.”

³³ Pierre Nicole, “Of Charity and Self-Love,” in *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), II.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., I.

In the Jansenist picture of self-love, like in Augustine's, religious beliefs play a salient role. This emphasis on religion in moral thought, however, was beginning to fall somewhat out of favor. The Jansenists were writing during a shift towards adopting relatively neutral religious assumptions in moral argumentation. The change occurred for a variety of reasons, but above all it was a consequence of the religious wars plaguing Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. The conflict produced greater variation in religious beliefs, which sent philosophers looking for general moral principals that everyone could agree on. For the most part they avoided extreme positions, such as atheism, that were outside the mainstream and likely to work against their argument. Instead, they incorporated generally held religious principles, while avoiding controversial sectarian doctrines. Hugo Grotius, the leading natural law theorist of the period, embodies this approach. Although God has a place in his theory of natural law, he tries to make him as uncontroversial as possible.³⁷ Thinkers like Grotius did not embrace secularism in morals, yet their theories represented a step in that direction.

Once this shift was under way, thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes pushed the envelope towards secularism. Though not avowedly atheist, Hobbes's uncompromisingly scientific approach to human behavior and social relations elicited that charge. He scrapped all explanations appealing to the divine, choosing to instead ground his theory in what he believed to be scientific facts about human nature. A strong determinism frames his understanding of phenomena in the world. Desires always direct action, "For as to have no desire, is to be dead."³⁸ Following one's desires, on this view, is neither good nor bad but simply how human beings act. Human beings constitute just another link on the causal chain, which is set in motion by desires.

³⁷ J.B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66-70.

³⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), VIII, 16.

Even when deliberating and believing themselves to consciously will one action over another, human beings in reality are following the last appetite in the deliberative process.

On the surface, Hobbes views the realization of subjective desires—another way of saying self-love—as natural and morally neutral. His determinism limits his ability to moralize about human actions and suggest how they should be, since human beings are constrained to a causal chain from which they cannot escape. But, though Hobbes resists pronouncing on the human nature’s moral standing, certain morally charged assumptions strongly influence his account of this nature. This point becomes clear when Hobbes describes how human beings fare in the state of nature, that is, an environment where the lack of an overarching authority creates a state of anarchy. Hobbes envisions that individuals in the state of nature will see one another as enemies. They will seek to overpower one another, which leads to a war of all against all. The state of nature inevitably engenders conflict because of its anarchical nature: in the lack of anything powerful enough to keep human desires in check, human relations degenerate into violent chaos.

Tucked away in Hobbes’s portrait of the state of nature are strong assumptions about human nature. Nothing about anarchy requires individuals to view each other as enemies.³⁹ Rousseau levels this charge against Hobbes when he argues that man in a truly natural and unprejudiced state responds to others with indifference.⁴⁰ To arrive at his pessimistic views on the state of nature, then, Hobbes assumes more than anarchy—specifically, he attributes to human nature a desire to dominate and a sense of hatred towards others. It is a description of

³⁹ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46 (1992): 402, 404-405.

⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I, 35; *Of the Social Contract, the Geneva Manuscript*, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I, 2.

human nature that bears a strong resemblance to the Augustinian portrait of fallen man. Surely Hobbes rejects Augustine's explanation of human behavior in terms of the Fall. Nevertheless, the pervasive Augustinian idea that the self is depraved still appears to have an indirect influence on Hobbes's thought. Man's nature is so inclined towards conflict that only the Leviathan can save it. When taking the form of agreeing to a social contract, self-love does work as a basis for society—but just barely.

Hobbes's misgivings about self-love remain at best implicit in his writings. By no means does he condemn self-love. Such a condemnation would be quite bizarre and out of place, given that self-love drives the Hobbesian state. In it people come together to cede their power to the Leviathan, for only by taking this action will they escape the state of nature. Other philosophers with secular leanings, especially the French *philosophes*, shared Hobbes's view that self-love functions as the basis for a harmonious society. Unsurprisingly, then, these secularly oriented philosophers tended to have positive views towards self-love, seeing it as morally praiseworthy or, at the least, morally neutral.⁴¹

Bernard Mandeville constitutes an important exception. Like Hobbes and many of the *philosophes*, Mandeville strongly believed that self-love provided the only path to a well-functioning society. Mandeville was not one to candy-coat his positions, as he even saw self-love in the form of vice—drinking, fornication, gambling—as a necessary part of a society's economic success. His best known book, *The Fable of the Bees*, recounts the story of a beehive that thrived while engaging in vice but that soon collapsed once the “knaves turned honest.” Although few like to admit it, vice makes possible the comfortable existence we all cherish, whereas virtue renders it impossible.⁴² An interesting aspect of Mandeville is that, while praising

⁴¹ See, e.g., Claude Adrien Helvétius, in *On the Mind*, in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Schneewind, II, 15.

⁴² Schneewind, “Introduction: Bernard Mandeville,” in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Schneewind, 388-89.

vice and attacking virtue, he refuses to revise traditional moral vocabulary. He comes across as so scandalous in his writings because he is advocating for vice—without qualification. Self-love, Mandeville admits, leads to tremendous social benefits, yet this truth also will unsettle one's moral sensibilities.

Self-love and virtue are mutually exclusive on Mandeville's account. It is a very Augustinian view—the only element missing from it is Augustine's exception for heavenly self-love. He discounts as moral any action motivated in the least by self-love. Even an apparently noble sentiment like pity turns out to be without moral worth because self-love enters into it. The person feeling pity

has nothing to boast of but that he has indulged a passion that has happened to be beneficial to the public. There is no merit in saving an innocent babe ready to drop in the fire. The action is neither good nor bad, and what benefit soever the infant received, we only obliged ourselves; for to have seen it fall, and not strove to hinder it, would have caused a pain which self-preservation compelled to prevent.⁴³

Because of the over the top nature of his example, Mandeville comes off as if he is just poking fun at traditional—and more specifically, Augustinian—morality. Mandeville certainly is having some fun, but he is also making an important point: virtue is much rarer than we think. He makes his argument by employing the same method used by Nicole in his essay “Of Charity and Self-Love.” Seeing an apparent act of virtue, Mandeville shows how self-love in all likelihood is at its base. If we accept Augustinian morality, we have to be honest with ourselves and recognize that most “virtuous” actions are just self-love in disguise.

For the few virtuous individuals that do exist, Mandeville describes what they look like: “Such men as without complying with any weakness of their own can part from what they value themselves, and from no other motive but their love of goodness perform a worthy action in

⁴³ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Schneewind, 395-96.

silence.” Suffice it to say, “the world has ... never swarmed” with theses individuals.⁴⁴

Mandeville paints virtue in such a way that it seems humanly impossible. But that may be just the point. Virtue demands that we go against our passions, interests, and desires—to act in a way so unnatural that it proves for most incomprehensible.⁴⁵ Augustine himself admits the difficulties involved with turning away from oneself and to a virtuous life of serving God. This transformation can only take through supernatural grace. Mandeville denies any such grace, however, which puts the virtuous life beyond reach. It is a result that Mandeville finds perfectly acceptable, for it gives one good reason to be knave and accept vice with open arms.

Mandeville represents one outcome of the secularization of Augustinian thought. Plagued by a corrupt nature but without a God to redeem them, human beings find morality to be impossible. Instead of fretting, figures like Mandeville suggest embracing whole heartedly one’s corrupt desires and inclinations. But not everyone finds this response satisfactory. For those wanting to preserve traditional moral beliefs in an environment where God is no longer a certainty, it is necessary to search for a basis for morality independent self-love. This second outcome of the secularization of Augustinian thought is where Kant comes into the picture.

Kant’s Problematic Solution

The ways in which one can approach Kant’s philosophy are virtually endless. The hoards of Kant scholars provide a smorgasbord of options to choose from. In our context, we want an approach that helps us locate, in the history of ideas, the connections between Kant’s moral philosophy and Augustinian moral thought. After this connection is made, we will have a more complete picture of altruism’s development into a normative ideal.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 396.

⁴⁵ Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, 327-29.

The way we are going to approach Kant's moral philosophy is one that is both familiar and on most accounts accurate. On this perspective, Kant's moral philosophy represents an attempt to secure traditional morality in a world increasingly hostile to it.⁴⁶ This approach suits our purposes here because it focuses on the connection between his thought and the Augustinian tradition, the traditional morality of Kant's world. Living in Prussia all his life, Kant was immersed in the Protestant/Augustinian tradition. This moral outlook was under siege because of the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, which increasingly raised doubts about divine revelation serving as the foundation of the Christian religion.

Kant, a child of the Enlightenment himself, was sympathetic to the concerns with traditional morality. Reason was the ultimate arbiter, and any version of morality worth holding onto had to pass reason's demands. Kant, however, was confident that much of the content of traditional morality could pass any test of reason and that, moreover, it offered something of value to the Enlightenment world. By taking up the cause of traditional morality, Kant wanted to ensure that Enlightenment thinkers in their critiques did not throw the baby out with the bath water.

To defend traditional morality, the Kantian project first has to depart from it in a radical way. Moral systems with Christian roots primarily justify themselves by appealing to the divine authority of the Bible. Kant cannot follow this pattern of justification and still appeal to the Enlightenment crowd, for it is this very aspect of traditional morality that they find so troubling. In turning to reason for justification, the question arises whether or not Kant can remain faithful to traditional morality. Replacing God as the bedrock of morality after all is no small move,

⁴⁶ Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, 488-89; Roger Scruton, *Kant*, Past Masters Series, ed. Keith Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71-72; Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-6.

especially in a Protestant context. Deeply ingrained in Protestantism is the idea, known as voluntarism, that God determines law and morality by fiat.⁴⁷ Kant wants to deny this claim, showing instead that reason orders all of morality. He is able to redeem himself a bit, by finding room in his moral theory for God and other Christian concepts such as immortality. The existence of God and immortality of the soul are necessary conditions for the perfection of virtue demanded by Kant's conception of morality, and thus a belief in these concepts play the role of making morality coherent.⁴⁸ But this aspect of Kant's theory at best covers over its fundamental differences with traditional morality rather than removes them. Reason still constitutes the most essential part of morality, without which the whole of Kant's system crumbles. God, by contrast, is relegated to a secondary role in his moral system.⁴⁹ More than tinkering with Christian morality centered on the Kingdom of God, Kant is proposing a new moral paradigm.

Despite the fundamental changes adopted by Kant, he still succeeds in recovering much of the content of Protestant morality. Most relevant to our present purposes is what Kant's moral philosophy shares with Protestantism's distrust of human desires and self-love. Kant does not go so far as to accept the Protestant doctrine of Original Sin, which renders human nature utterly corrupt.⁵⁰ But he does eschew attributing moral worth to the subjective desires and actions aimed at realizing them. On Kant's view, only those actions motivated out of a sense of moral duty have intrinsic moral worth.⁵¹ There is much criticism of Kant's concept of duty, so much so that it at times degenerates to the point of caricaturing his views. In defense of Kant, his concept of

⁴⁷ Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, 8-9, 17-36.

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:132-142; see Sullivan, 223-25.

⁴⁹ Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 279.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:37-41, 44; see Sullivan 268-270.

⁵¹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, 4:397-401.

duty does not lead to an absolute condemnation of self-love. In fact, he sees the pursuit of happiness as part of the moral life.⁵² Self-love is not contrary to morality but simply fails as a solid foundation for it.⁵³

Yet, even with these qualifications, the severe morality of Augustine or Nicole cannot help but come to mind when reading Kant. Reminiscent of Nicole, Kant holds that it is impossible to know whether an individual acts out of duty or self-love.⁵⁴ For those actions resembling moral ones but done out of self-love, Kant denies that they are in any sense moral. He illustrates his claim by discussing beneficent actions done out of “an inner satisfaction for them.” “[I]n such a case,” Kant writes, “however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, [the action] has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example, the inclination to honor.”⁵⁵ This position resembles Augustine’s view that loving one’s neighbor without the purpose of loving God falls short of righteous action.⁵⁶ For Augustinians, righteous action lies solely in loving of God; for Kant, moral action lies solely in acting out of a sense of moral duty. In both cases, the desires and inclinations natural to human nature prove too unreliable to be a basis for morality.

The true basis for morality, on Kant’s view, is reason. In its most fundamental form, reason tells us that one commits a logical error when one asserts and denies the same thing. Kant uses this dictate of reason, the principle of non-contradiction, to construct his moral theory. Morality in its essential form consists in keeping true to the principle of non-contradiction in one’s actions. Kant sums up this thought in his famous formulation of the categorical imperative,

⁵² Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, 6:386; *Groundwork*, 4:399; see Sullivan, 202-203.

⁵³ For a sympathetic account of Kant’s misgivings about self-love, see Christine Korsgaard, “Kant’s Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of *Groundwork I*,” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43-76.

⁵⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:407.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:398.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I, 39-40.

known as the Formula of Universal Law: “*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*”⁵⁷ Reason, not self-love, issues this command. Since his normative argument has no need to appeal to self-love, Kant goes in a direction radically different from the Augustinians. Augustine and his followers try to convince others to serve God by arguing that such action will lead to the highest possible good, eternal communion with God. Kant, on the other hand, says that reason alone motivates moral action.

If reason does indeed motivate moral action—and that is a big IF—Kant has no need to appeal to self-love when making his normative argument. As a result, he has overcome the most significant obstacle to normative altruism. Having shown that self-love is unnecessary to normativity, Kant goes on argue that reason demands that we care for the welfare of others. When we violate the categorical imperative, we make an exception for ourselves, saying it is okay for us to act one way while holding everyone else to a different standard. We usually act in this manner so as to pursue our own interests unfettered by the moral law. For instance, we know that lying is contrary to the categorical imperative because lies fail to work when everyone engages in them. Nevertheless, lying can serve as a shortcut to realizing our interests, and thus sometimes we lie. By condemning the lie, the categorical imperative makes sure that we do not use others as a means to advance our interests. The categorical imperative, then, has the following consequence: it forces us to take everyone else’s interests as serious as our own. Kant expresses this altruistic idea a bit less clearly in a reformulation of the categorical imperative: “*act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*”⁵⁸ In relations with others, the moral actor is

⁵⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:402.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:429.

to think of herself as living in a Kingdom of Ends.⁵⁹ It is a new paradigm for morality—one that, uncontaminated by appeals to self-love, makes the boldest attempt seen thus far at justifying normative altruism.

Kant believes that his categorical imperative succeeds in providing a rational foundation for traditional morality. Others, though, have been less convinced. More than 200 years of Kantian criticism has yielded diverse and sundry objections to Kant's moral theory. I have nothing new to add to these objections, but will simply repeat a few of them. Kant wants us to believe that reason alone can motivate us to action. This position, however, clashes with the orthodox view that reason is instrumental: it only can function in the presence of a given goal. The principle of non-contradiction does not lead ineluctably to the moral law, argue the critics. A moral skeptic may use people as means without the slightest feeling of compunction or fear of contradiction. When asked if he approves of others using him as a means, he may reply by saying: "let them get on with it, if they want to: you are not going to find me moralising about it."⁶⁰ Our moral skeptic may even be a Nietzschean, who hopes that others relentlessly strive for glory and are not afraid to step on people in the process. In this way, glory becomes coveted and has more value. Certainly, the moral skeptic lives a life full of conflict. But this conflict does not entail contradiction, and thus the skeptic's life—to Kant's horror—is compatible with the categorical imperative. Unlike Kant claims, rationality does not demand that one strive for the Kingdom of Ends. Kant's theory has difficulty standing up to these objections. Suffice it to say, the categorical imperative never was a slam-dunk among moral philosophers.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 4:433.

⁶⁰ Bernard Williams, "Egoism and Altruism," *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers, 1956-1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 255-56.

Reworking Kant—and Altruism

The problems in Kant's theory have motivated a number of modern philosophers to look for a way around them. We will look at two particularly influential ones, Christine Korsgaard and Thomas Nagel, to see how their revisions try to salvage Kant's argument for normative altruism.

Although a committed Kantian, Korsgaard concedes that the categorical imperative, as the Formula of Universal Law, fails to capture all of morality.⁶¹ Like many critics of Kant, she does not see how the principle of non-contradiction entails the need to strive for the realization of the Kingdom of Ends. Korsgaard nevertheless does believe that Kant's idea of a Kingdom of Ends is the correct way to conceive of morality. Her primary challenge, then, is convincing us that the perspective of seeing oneself as a citizen of the Kingdom of Ends has normative value.

In making this argument, she departs from Kant in an important way: she is willing to make egoistic appeals. This aspect of her argument comes out when trying to explain why we should choose to see ourselves as a member of the Kingdom of Ends. She argues that, as human beings, this normative perspective proves inescapable. Times inevitably arise when we are tempted to forsake this identity, such as when treating others as ends involves great personal sacrifice. The way that we motivate ourselves to remain true to our identity is by recognizing its incredible value. In Korsgaard's words, our motivation derives from the realization that violating our identity would be "worse than death."⁶²

The egoistic nature of this reason for maintaining our identity strikes some as unsatisfactory. Nagel, for one, does not see how such self-interested action could be moral action.⁶³ One could defend Korsgaard with the following argument: If your identity consists of being altruistic—say, treating people as ends in themselves—then how is it egoistic to want to

⁶¹ Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99-100.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶³ Nagel, "Universality and the Reflective Self," in Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 206-207.

maintain true to this identity at all costs? In one sense, this seems right. Some ideal must guide the altruist, and it is to be expected that she will value this ideal and will not want to depart from it. One cannot deny this point, but Korsgaard's example goes beyond simply wanting to maintain true to an ideal. Her hypothetical individual recognizes what her identity demands, but that alone does not motivate her. Instead, she must imagine what life would be like after turning her back on her identity. Only when she recognizes the extreme costs to *herself* of such a course of action does she decide to keep her identity. Once at this point in the deliberative process, she clearly lacks altruistic motivation, for her own self-interest is dictating her actions. Ultimately, then, Korsgaard's normative argument has a strong egoistic element to it—that is how she gets to a complete picture of morality. As a self-proclaimed Kantian, her departure on this point is significant: it suggests that grounding morality in reason alone—the Kantian project—falls short of achieving its goal.

Nagel is not a self-proclaimed Kantian like Korsgaard, but he nevertheless resembles Kant in the argument he sets forth in *The Possibility of Altruism*. As the title suggests, Nagel tries to show how altruistic motivation is at the very least a coherent concept. Unlike Korsgaard, he refuses to appeal to our interests: “The view presented here ... is opposed ... to any demand that the claims of ethics appeal to our interests: either self-interests or the interest we may happen to take in other things and other persons. The altruism which in my view underlies ethics is not to be confused with generalized affection for the human race. It is not a feeling.”⁶⁴ What motivates altruism, on Nagel's view, are objective rather than subjective reasons. And by objective reasons, Nagel means that they make no reference to the doer of an act and are universal.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-98.

In response to Nagel's theory, some ask incredulously where one finds these objective reasons. The criticism is similar to that leveled against Kant, namely, that ignoring objective reasons results in no error in rationality.⁶⁶ To be fair to Nagel, he is only talking about the *possibility* of altruism. Nevertheless, it is a possibility that he is advocating hard for, because in his view a great deal is at stake. If there are no objective reasons, "Then morality is an illusion ... and the sceptics are right."⁶⁷ Without a doubt, Nagel like Kant has difficulty putting to rest the skeptics' doubts. To them, objective reasons are nowhere to be found, and at best can be explained as the figment of a few misguided philosophers' imaginations. For the moment, we will put aside the question of deciding which side of the debate makes a stronger argument. In Part III we will be in a better position to evaluate the merits of Nagel's theory of altruism after taking a closer look at human psychology, specifically human motivation.

Conclusion

Arguments about normative altruism today ultimately have their basis in the Augustinian tradition. The trend towards normative altruism grew out of Augustine's intense mistrust of human nature. Self-love was problematical because, on the Augustinian/Protestant view, the self was hopelessly corrupt. Only a unique form of self-love concerned with heavenly well-being possessed moral worth. This position started to fall out of vogue during Enlightenment, when people increasingly started to question moral views grounded in religious faith. These doubts led to Kant's ambitious project of trying to base traditional moral views in reason rather than in God. By making morality independent of all form of self-interest, including one's self-interest in the afterlife, Kant justified morality without having to appeal to self-love. As a result, he opened up

⁶⁶ Bernard Williams, "Egoism and Altruism," 257-58.

⁶⁷ Nagel, "Universality and the Reflective Self," in Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 207.

the way for normative altruism. To be sure, his argument for normative altruism had a number of problems with it, such as explaining how reason alone can motivate moral—i.e., altruistic—action. Altruism's normative status remains in doubt today as contemporary philosophers consistently confront difficulties when trying to overcome the problems in Kant's moral theory.

Part III

The Problems with Normative Altruism

“Too much altruism is oppressive and exacting.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, May 6, 1944

Kant asserted that rationality provides objective reasons for moral action, regardless of inclination, which in effect enshrined altruism as a normative ideal. Yet Kant had difficulties explaining how rationality motivates altruism, and those who carry on his theory today either encounter the same problems or opt for minimizing the altruistic element in his theory. Thus, in spite of normative altruism’s rise, it stands on shaky ground. Of course, just because Kant encountered difficulties in explaining how to motivate altruism in others, a coherent explanation of the process still may be out there. I, though, am going to suggest that the nature of altruistic motivation gives us good reason to doubt altruism’s status as a normative ideal. The reason why is that, for certain individuals, experiencing altruistic motivation is an impossibility. Demanding altruism of them essentially involves demanding the impossible, which is out of place in our views on normativity. A related problem is that normative altruism hinders moral discourse by excluding from it a significant portion of the population. Given these shortcomings, altruism fails as a normative ideal. But, in making this claim, it by no means follows that altruism is simply a myth. In fact, evidence for altruism’s existence abounds. Instead of continuing to focus on altruism’s normative side, a more fruitful approach lies in seeing it primarily in descriptive terms.

Two Conceptions of Altruism

Up to this point our focus has been on normative conceptions of altruism. Most debates about altruism (or the related concepts of benevolence, charity, self-love, and selfishness) in Western thought have centered on whether or not morality demands altruism. The culmination of these

debates came in the form of Kant's assertion that altruistic motivation is an essential part of morality. In other words, Kant and those subscribing to his ethical theory argue that one *ought* to be altruistic. The influence of such a view is evident in the moral connotations bound up in the word altruism. Say altruism and inevitably words like "good," "moral," and maybe even "saint" come to mind. Most discussions of altruism carry with them the assumption that it is something that one ought to do, except in the case of a rare dissenter who insists that altruism is pernicious.¹

There is of course another way to speak about altruism. Instead of asking whether one ought to be altruistic, one may ask whether altruism exists, and if so when and where. This second question understands altruism in a descriptive manner. It is this type of conception of altruism present in the sciences. Scientists could care less about the moral status of altruism; they just want to know if a certain creature exhibits it. This impartial approach to altruism is rare in everyday discourse, where descriptive conceptions of altruism tend to be subordinated to the moral aspects of the term. If I read in the newspaper about an individual who fights off a bear to save the life of a stranger, calling that person an altruist rarely carries the same dispassionate meaning as saying that the person speaks Italian, is six foot one, and lives in Vermont. The term altruist has descriptive power, but the term also invokes moral connotations that tend to push out all else. In a culture where normative altruism has such widespread influence, one often has to consciously think about altruism differently in order to arrive at a descriptive conception of it.

What follows below is an attempt to sort out these two different conceptions of altruism. Both descriptive and normative altruism are controversial. The assertion that altruism exists

¹ E.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 258, 265; "Why I am Destiny," *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 4; "Preface," *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), IV, 7; "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," *Twilight of Idol in Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 35; and Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 27, 34.

elicits many evolutionary biologists' ire just as normative arguments for altruism infuriate advocates of egoism such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand. The goal is to cut through the strong emotions, look at the arguments on both sides, and determine whether altruism makes sense on a descriptive level, a normative level, or both.

Evidence for Altruism on a Descriptive Level

We will begin by looking to see if altruism actually exists in the world. Although an important question in itself, whether or not altruism exists also pertains to normative debates on the subject. The complete absence of altruism in the world would count against a normative argument for it, by suggesting that altruism is impossible. After all, it would make little sense to buy into the idea that one ought to be altruistic if such an ideal proves beyond one's capabilities. On the other hand, if we do find evidence for altruism, we will be assured that it is possible, at least in certain situations.

Defenders of normative altruism do have reason to be initially encouraged because evidence keeps coming in suggesting that altruism is a very real phenomenon. Regardless of one's normative views, the growing consensus in psychology and behavioral biology is that human beings and many species of animals demonstrate altruistic behavior. Furthermore, examples of altruism in human interactions and in nature turn out not to be aberrations but rather part of a consistent pattern of behavior. For some time, the overwhelming evidence for altruism was seen as a threat to the evolutionary paradigm. How could there be room for altruism when nature is at its heart a fierce battle where only the fittest survive? The apparent clash between altruism and Darwin's theory leads to the rejection of the former by some evolutionary biologists, who offer in its place ingenious theories to explain all forms of cooperative behavior

in terms of self-interest. But even now in the field of evolutionary biology the consensus is starting to shift towards allowing a place for altruism. Rather than a mere hope or dream, altruism proves to be a real and inescapable part of life.

Throughout most of Western history the issue of altruism has arisen in the context of philosophical discussions. That began to change in the 20th century when psychology joined the altruism debate, bringing with it a new approach aimed at objectively testing for the phenomenon. One psychologist in particular, Daniel Batson, has dedicated much of his career to trying to answer the question of whether or not altruism exists. He conducted a series of experiments during the 1980s, in which he manipulated conditions so as to test for the presence of altruism.² In designing these experiments, Batson faced the challenge of having to set them up in a way that would reveal the participants' underlying motivations.

Despite the objection that it is impossible to decipher an individual's true motivation, Batson forged ahead with his work. Supernatural powers in mind reading would be ideal for determining people's motivations, but on Batson's view we still can get by with more modest means. In life, when we want to know why an individual acted the way she did, we look to situations that disentangle her potential sources of motivation from each. Certain situations preclude all sources of motivation except one, leaving us relatively certain about an individual's reason for action. Batson gives the following example to illustrate this strategy:

Suzie and Frank work together. One morning, music-loving Suzie is unusually attentive to homely but well-heeled Frank. "Why?" Frank wonders, "Is it because my prayers have been answered, and Suzie is smitten by my charms? Or is she broke and wanting me to take her to the concert this weekend?" Frank's dilemma is to determine the nature of Suzie's motivation; he wants to know her ultimate goal. As matters stand, however, Frank lacks the information to make a clear inference—though wishful thinking may provide one. Now imagine that Suzie comes back from lunch, opens her mail, and finds that her father has sent her two

² Daniel C. Batson, *The Altruism Question: Toward a Social-Psychological Answer* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991).

tickets to the concert. If she coolly passes Frank on her way to invite John, then Frank can infer with considerable confidence—and chagrin—the ultimate goal of her earlier attentions. He knows her motive.³

The same logic used by Frank is applicable when determining whether or not someone is acting altruistically. An individual may help another either out of altruistic or egoistic reasons. To find out the answer, “we must vary the helping situation in a way that disentangles the confounding of the benefit to other and the benefits to self.”⁴ It is this approach that guides Batson in his experiments.

Batson admits that ultimately it is impossible to be 100 percent sure that someone’s motivation is altruistic. Even if an experiment eliminates one self-benefit, another may still lurk behind it and serve as the source of motivation. Although this point is important to recognize, its consequences are not as catastrophic to Batson’s project as they may seem. The same lack of absolute certainty, Batson points out, exists in science. Scientists can never test a theory in all possible situations, and thus some situations always remain untested. Nevertheless, after a large number of tests in which varying conditions validate each other, scientists conclude that a theory holds universally.⁵ Following the scientific method, Batson formulates a hypothesis—“Empathic emotion evokes altruistic motivation to have the other’s need reduced”⁶—and then tests this hypothesis under a wide range of varying conditions. If time and again the experiments show evidence of altruism, Batson argues, then we can reasonably conclude that altruism does indeed exist.

Batson carried out too many experiments to go through them all here, but we shall look at one to get the general flavor of his work. The experiment described here tested for altruism,

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁵ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶ Ibid., 90.

specifically keeping in mind the objection that helping is a means of “aversive-arousal reduction.” According to some psychologists, people help because they want to eliminate the pain they feel from seeing someone else in pain. To test this claim, Batson designed an experiment in which the participants would observe a girl named Elaine receive minor shocks (simulated, of course), before then being offered an opportunity to take her place. One group, in the easy-escape condition, could leave and would not have to watch Elaine endure continued shocks if they refused to take her place. The other group, in the difficult-escape condition, would have to continue to watch Elaine after opting not to take her place. If people merely help to avoid witnessing someone else’s pain, then those in the easy-escape condition should help much less. After all, they can avoid the pain of watching Elaine by simply leaving. What Batson found, however, went against the aversive-arousal reduction hypothesis. Regardless of whether participants were in the easy- or difficult-escape condition, those induced to feel empathy for Elaine overwhelmingly demonstrated helping behavior.⁷ Clearly, then, this experiment, along with others replicating it, answered one objection to altruism. Of course, other objections still remained. According to some psychologists, individuals feeling empathy help so as to gain rewards or to avoid punishments unique to empathy. Taking these objections into account, Batson performed further experiments testing for altruism. Over and over again, the results came back the same: participants experiencing empathy on average demonstrated altruistic behavior.⁸

One limitation of Batson’s experiments was that they only tested for altruism on a very low level. This limitation was unavoidable, since designing an experiment with potentially severe costs to its participants raised ethical concerns. Although the results would be extremely interesting, few would consent to an experiment that positioned participants along the side of a

⁷ Ibid., 116-17.

⁸ Ibid., 128-74.

road with a baby on it and observed how they would react to a car racing towards the helpless infant. Batson understandably never designed any experiments with cars careening towards babies, but in one he did raise the costs perceived by participants, albeit slightly. In a study similar to one discussed above, participants were informed that they would receive “Clearly painful but not harmful” shocks rather than minor shocks if they filled in for Elaine. The result was a significant drop in participants choosing to act altruistically.⁹ The change in behavior is perhaps disappointing but surely not surprising. Simply put, when the costs go up, people help less.

Although altruism is rare in cases where an individual faces the prospect of great personal loss, extreme examples of altruism still exist. One group in which one would expect to find a high number of altruists is among those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. These individuals put their lives in danger to save, in many cases, total strangers. Obviously, the reasons driving such actions differed from person to person. It is therefore too rash a claim to say that *all* the rescuers acted out of altruistic motivations. Yet even with this caveat, these individuals provide us with good reason to suspect the presence of altruistic motivation within them, given their past sacrifices. For this reason, a number of researchers interested in altruism have interviewed rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust so as to better understand what drove them to act the way they did.

Attempting to decipher individuals’ motivation through interviews carries with it certain problems. First of all, the researcher is almost entirely dependent on rescuers’ own accounts of why they decided to help. On occasion, third parties may vouch for or against rescuers’ stories, but even they lack insight into the underlying motivations driving rescuers’ actions. This inability to independently verify rescuers’ accounts of their actions opens the door to self-serving

⁹ Ibid., 124-26.

portrayals of events—always a possibility, even among the noblest of individuals. Second, because the actions under consideration occurred in the past, the researcher is unable to manipulate conditions so as to isolate altruistic motivation. The endless variables in play means that any analysis of rescuers' actions will lack the sort of scientific rigor found in laboratory experiments, such as those Batson carried out.

Despite the shortcomings of the interview method, those interested in altruism still must use it if they are to learn anything about altruistic motivation in cases of extreme sacrifice. Fortunately, there are ways to minimize errors in evaluations of others' accounts of what motivated them. Obviously, responses following a consistent pattern provide stronger evidence for a certain type of motivation than a few well-chosen testimonies. Also, those explanations of motivation that do little to glorify the individual's reasons for acting are less open to doubt. With a cautionary approach, then, personal accounts of sacrifice can provide insight into the nature of altruistic motivation.

Three researchers well known for using this approach are Kristen Renwick Monroe and Samuel and Pearl Oliner. In separate studies,¹⁰ Monroe and the Oliners interviewed a significant number of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, with the explicit goal of better understanding why some people are altruistic. What they found were varying sources of motivation, some of which appear to be genuine altruism. The motivations of some rescuers clearly were not altruistic. Specifically, those in communities committed to helping its Jewish population often spoke of not wanting to let their community down. These individuals thus helped in part so as to avoid incurring a sense of guilt.¹¹ Others, however, described their motivation in a way

¹⁰ Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*; and Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

¹¹ Samuel P. Oliner, "Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People: Faces of Heroism and Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al, 126.

congruent with altruism. On their account, they did not explain their decision to help as a deliberate act driven by their own wants and desires. Instead, helping came naturally to many rescuers, who needed little time to reflect on the potential costs involved in helping.¹² As one Italian rescuer recalls events, the decision to help was, in many respects, a non-decision:

It was all something very simple. Nothing grandiose was done. It was done simply without considering risk, without thinking whether it would be an occasion for recognition or to be maligned, it was in effect done out of innocence. I didn't think I was doing anything other than what should be done, or that I was in any special danger because of what I was doing. Justice had to be done. Persecution of the innocents was unacceptable.¹³

This particular rescuer evokes ideas of justice in explaining his reasons for acting, which was not uncommon in rescuers' accounts.¹⁴ What is somewhat surprising, though, is the significant number of rescuers who described their decisions in amoral terms. A German rescuer named Otto puts it this way: "I had no choice. I never made a moral decision to rescue Jews. I just got mad. I felt I had to do it. I came across many things that demanded my compassion."¹⁵ This rescuer is one of many who saw their actions as "normal"—in fact, so normal that describing their actions in moral and religious terms struck them as out of place. This same sentiment comes across again and again in interviews, here in the words of another German rescuer, Margot: "You don't think about these things. You can't think about these things. It happened so quickly."¹⁶ She resolutely denies doing anything praiseworthy,¹⁷ for on her view helping was simply a reflex, an unconscious decision. From the perspective of an outside observer, their acts were extraordinary, but for the rescuers themselves they were anything but.

¹² Monroe, 208-213.

¹³ Samuel P. Oliner, "Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People: Faces of Heroism and Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-28.

¹⁵ Monroe, xi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

This common view among rescuers that their actions were normal and required little deliberation strongly suggests that they acted altruistically in the strictest sense of the word. Because helping was in so many cases a reflex rather than a conscious choice, there was little time for calculations of costs and benefits to enter their mind. Upon seeing Jews in need, rescuers immediately recognized that it was imperative to allay this need without a subjective desire motivating them. We have reason to believe their motivational accounts are true due to the consistency of the testimonies. Words and phrases like “normal,” “natural,” “nothing special,” “without thinking,” and “never gave it a thought” come up again and again in interviews with rescuers. Furthermore, describing an action as unconscious is not the strategy normally employed to garner praise. In the self-glorifying genre of political memoirs, for instance, the reader often comes across descriptions of events in which the politician recalls feeling the full angst of a decision but nevertheless overcame it to make the right choice. Of course, a skeptic can always level the claim that rescuers exhibit false modesty, so as to make themselves look ever the more saintly. Perhaps. But if their responses are indeed a strategy to raise themselves up in others’ eyes, it is an odd and counterproductive one. By characterizing their actions as unconscious and natural, rescuers give the impression that they were lucky rather than morally good. For this reason, the evidence strongly supports an altruistic interpretation of the rescuers’ actions. If they truly wanted to glorify themselves in their descriptions, they would emphasize the conscious and difficult nature of their choice to help others in need. Instead, rescuers describe in an unassuming manner feeling a natural impulse to help those in need, and in the process provide a glimpse into the essence of altruism.

Rescuers’ accounts of why they acted shed light on the nature of altruistic motivation, yet questions still remain on how it works. Batson showed that altruism starts with first being able to

empathize with others in need, and unsurprisingly many of the rescuers speak of understanding the pain the Jews endured when others often did not. So altruists feel empathy, but another question remains: What predisposes people to empathy and, consequently, altruism? Common sense beliefs point to the community, family, and religion people grow up in. These social structures are in a position to cultivate empathy and other-regarding actions, especially during one's formative years. Aware of these hypotheses, Monroe looked for evidence supporting them in her study on altruism. When interviewing rescuers, she would ask them questions about their background: Did they come from a prominent family, accustomed to aiding others in the community? Was their family religious? Did they grow up in a small, close-knit community, or rather a more metropolitan setting? The information rescuers gave about their backgrounds did not give way to any discernible patterns. They came from a hodgepodge of different types of communities, families, and religious backgrounds that in no way distinguished them from the rest of population. Monroe therefore could not pinpoint any specific sociocultural factor as a source of altruism.¹⁸ The only thing altruists all shared with each other was their worldview that helping people was a normal and an expected part of life.¹⁹ Of course, Monroe's conclusions do not entirely rule out sociocultural factors as a source of altruism. Future studies may indeed reveal that one or a number of sociocultural factors make altruistic behavior more likely. At the moment, however, there simply is no clear-cut evidence to support this claim.

Evidence that biology is a source of altruism, on the other hand, is much stronger. A growing number of studies suggest that altruism is ingrained into human beings. We now know, for instance, that identical twins (siblings sharing the same genes) are more likely to exhibit

¹⁸ Ibid., 121-36.

¹⁹ Ibid., 197-216.

similar levels of altruistic inclination than are fraternal twins.²⁰ Particularly compelling discoveries about altruism have been coming out of neurobiology. Scientists in the field have succeeded in pinpointing a specific part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, as the center for pro-social behavior, including altruism.

The story most famously illustrating this point is one familiar to every introductory psychology student—that of Phineas Gage. In 1848, Gage was in Vermont doing railroad work as a construction foreman. While pounding spikes into the ground, gunpowder under one suddenly caught fire and set it flying through Gage's head. The blow knocked him to the ground, but to everyone's surprise and bewilderment he survived—in fact, by the end of the day he was walking and talking! Initially, the accident appeared to have left Gage unharmed. With time, though, it became clear that Gage had changed. Before the accident, he was a well-mannered and socially adept individual known for his hard work; after the accident, he was irascible, capricious, and aloof to others. The railroad spike, though leaving intact his motor and speaking skills, had taken away his social skills.²¹

The railroad spike had the effect it did because it damaged areas of the prefrontal cortex in Gage's brain.²² By examining individuals with brain injuries similar to Gage's, neurobiologists have determined that proper functioning of the prefrontal cortex is essential for the ability to empathize, plan for the future, and adapt to changing social settings. These social skills that most take for granted are lost or severely impaired after suffering an injury to the

²⁰ J.P. Rushton and D.W. Fulker, "Altruism and Aggression: The Heritability of Individual Differences," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50 (1986): 1192-98, cited in Melvin Konner, "Some Obstacles to Altruism," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 196.

²¹ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 3-10.

²² *Ibid.*, 31-33.

prefrontal cortex.²³ The prefrontal cortex obviously does not explain everything about the complex phenomenon of social interaction. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that this area of the brain provides the foundation for basic social behaviors such as altruism.²⁴

Our search for evidence of altruism thus far has focused on *Homo sapiens*, but we now will turn briefly to instances of altruistic behavior in animals. Although certainly an intriguing topic, altruism in animals is more than a pleasant diversion in this study about human views on altruism. The presence of altruism in species other than our own strongly suggests that it does indeed have a biological basis. More than a quirk specific to human beings, altruism turns up throughout nature.

A combination of lab experiments and observations of animal behavior has produced persuasive evidence that altruistic behavior is common in animals. In an experiment that masochistic psychologists could only dream of, albino rats in a cage watched as another rat dangled and writhed helplessly in the air. By pressing a bar, the rats in the cage could lower their conspecific and relieve its distress. Results showed that rats pressed the bar more often when a fellow rat was hanging in front of them.²⁵ Another experiment involved monkeys that had to choose between receiving a larger portion of food and protecting one of their conspecifics from being shocked. The monkeys were placed in a cage with two chains that delivered food when pulled. One chain delivered twice as much food as the other, but this same chain also delivered a shock to a monkey in full view of the one pulling the chain. Two-thirds of the monkeys undergoing this experiment preferred the nonshock chain delivering less food. There were even

²³ Antonio Damasio, 34-51; and Hanna Damasio, "Impairment of Interpersonal Social Behavior Caused by Acquired Brain Damage," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 272-83.

²⁴ Hanna Damasio, 282.

²⁵ Rice, G.E., Jr., and P. Gainer, "'Altruism' in the Albino Rat," *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* 55 (1962): 123-25, cited in Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal, "The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 292.

some monkeys that, after seeing their conspecific shocked, refused to pull either chain, effectively starving themselves for days on end.²⁶ In both experiments, rats and monkey acted altruistically in the sense that they sacrificed their own fitness to increase the fitness of a conspecific.

As we said in the Introduction, this definition of altruism typically is used when talking about animal behavior because of the difficulties involved in deciphering their motivations. Some scientists, nevertheless, have ventured into the murky area of animal motivation, and have come away with some interesting findings. Particularly relevant to the matter at hand is the finding that many species of animal exhibit empathy. Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal explain exactly how it works: “empathy relies on the fact that conspecifics are emotionally interlinked. The emotional state of one individual has the potential to elicit a similar state in nearby individuals.”²⁷ This close emotional link amongst members of a species prompts them to aid those in a state of distress.

The way a species responds to distress depends largely on where it falls on the evolutionary spectrum. The most primitive type of response involves emotional contagion, in which the sight of distress creates a similar state in the observer. Gripped by its own distress, the creature undergoing emotional contagion tends to experience largely self-focused emotion. A more advanced response to distress comes in the form of empathy. Empathy differs from emotional contagion because, though experiencing a state similar to the creature in distress, the observer’s emotion remains other- not self-focused. The final and most advanced response to

²⁶ S. Wechkin, J.H. Masserman, and W. Terris Jr, “Shock to a Conspecific as an Aversive Stimulus,” *Psychonomic Science* 1 (1964): 47-48; and J.H. Masserman, S. Wechkin, and W. Terris, “‘Altruistic’ Behavior in Rhesus Monkeys,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 121 (1964): 584-85, cited in Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal, “The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals,” in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 294-95.

²⁷ Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal, “The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals,” in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 286.

distress is cognitive empathy, a late behavioral development in evolutionary history that only appears in the great apes.²⁸ Cognitive empathy consists of not only sharing a distressed state with another animal but doing so by cognitive means, “as when the distress of the [observed animal] is displaced spatially or temporally, when the situation of distress is unfamiliar, or when the object of distress is unfamiliar.”²⁹ In other words, cognitive empathy involves more than an instinctual reaction to observed pain. An animal rather cognitively works through some divide between itself and the creature it observes so as to experience the distress the other is going through.

We know that great apes, such as chimpanzees and bonobos, are capable of cognitive empathy because of their ability to adopt other creatures’ perspectives. In experiments, apes can watch an animal perform a task, and then use that knowledge to perform the same task when given an opportunity. Evolutionarily less developed monkeys, on the other hand, fail to carry out the task under similar conditions.³⁰ Markedly different than their ancestors, great apes have a unique knack for taking on a perspective that is foreign to them. To no surprise, then, people have observed apes in even unfamiliar situations working towards the relief of other creatures’ distress. A curious incident involving a female bonobo named Kuni and a bird serves as one such example:

One day, Kuni captured a starling. Out of fear that she might molest the stunned bird, which appeared undamaged, the keeper urged the ape to let it go. Perhaps because of this encouragement, Kuni took the bird outside and gently set it onto its feet, the right way up, where it stayed looking petrified. When it didn’t move, she threw it a little, but it just fluttered. Not satisfied, Kuni picked up the starling with one hand and climbed to the highest point of the highest tree where she wrapped her legs around the trunk so that she had both hands free to hold the bird. She then carefully unfolded its wings and spread them wide open, one wing in each hand, before throwing the bird as hard [as] she could towards the barrier

²⁸ Ibid., 297-98.

²⁹ Ibid., 287.

³⁰ Ibid., 298.

of the enclosure. Unfortunately, it fell short and landed onto the bank of the moat where Kuni guarded it for a long time against a curious juvenile. By the end of the day, the bird was gone without a trace or feather. It is assumed that, recovered from its shock, it had flown away.³¹

Kuni adopted, albeit a bit awkwardly, the bird's perspective in its efforts to help it. Kuni's behavior was by no means an aberration, but one of many examples demonstrating great apes' capacity for cognitive empathy.

It is important to understand how empathy works in the great apes because, as human beings' closest ancestors, they help shed light on our own motivations. To recap, great apes experience an advanced emotional state known as cognitive empathy, which in turn gives way to altruistic motivation. When human beings act altruistically, essentially this same process is at work. Of course, human beings are more advanced in their cognitive reasoning, but that does not change the fundamental similarities of the altruistic behavior exhibited by the two species. Rather than being a phenomenon a few nutty philosophers made up, human altruism has a strong biological basis, shared by our closest ancestors.

To be more exact, human altruism springs out of an emotional heritage shared, at least in part, by a wide range of organisms. Before cognitive empathy appeared in the great apes, less developed states of empathy directed animals' reactions to distress, which stay with us today. Cognitive empathy does not replace these more primitive states, but instead they exist together in human beings.³² Emotional contagion, for instance, is evident in a child's response to a traumatic event, in which he retreats to his mother for comfort. Although this emotional state continues to be a part of the child, with time he also develops more advanced ones such as cognitive

³¹ F.B.M. de Waal, *Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 156, quoted in Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal, "The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 297.

³² Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B.M. de Waal, "The Communication of Emotions and the Possibility of Empathy in Animals," in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 287.

empathy³³—the state most closely associated with altruistic motivation. The development of empathy and altruism in human beings mirrors a similar development in nature as a whole.

The evidence we have gone through so far—from interviews with rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe to experiments on lab rats—all points to the widespread existence of altruism in both human beings and animals. Empirically, altruism seems to have a strong biological basis. How, though, do we explain it theoretically? Evolutionary theory, which structures the field of biology, has the appearance of being inimical to the concept of altruism. After all, on Darwin’s view life consists of a fierce struggle for limited resources, in which the losers perish. The organisms that survive are those programmed to act in a way furthering their *own* survival and reproductive success. In such a competitive world, what room is there to be altruistic?

None whatsoever, say some biologists. They reject altruism because they see it as entirely incompatible with Darwin’s theory. Richard Dawkins argues forcefully for this position in his book *The Selfish Gene*. As the title implies, Dawkins takes the view that selfishness characterizes all aspects of life. Genes that do the best job of replicating themselves necessarily will come to dominate in the world. It is these sorts of “selfish” genes that drive life at all levels of existence. From this groundwork, Dawkins goes on to make the bold claim that “Disinterested altruism [is] something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world.”³⁴ Altruism only comes about when human beings rise above their biological nature or, in Dawkins’s words, “rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.”³⁵

Obviously, Dawkins has some explaining to do. As we have already seen, much of the behavior in nature certainly *looks* altruistic. Dawkins admits that there is quite a bit of

³³ William B. Hurlbut, “Empathy, Evolution, and Altruism,” in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 318.

³⁴ Dawkins, 201.

³⁵ Ibid.

cooperation in nature, but he stresses that it is not altruistic. Drawing on computer formulations of the prisoner's dilemma, Dawkins shows that organisms that cooperate end up faring best. If an organism avoids conflict and the waste in resources and energy it involves, and instead chooses to cooperate—at least with those organisms also willing to do so—it will thrive and have reproductive success.³⁶ Apparently helpful actions are thus in reality sophisticated forms of selfishness. Dawkins stresses this point when talking about parents in the animal kingdom that dotingly watch out for their offspring. A bird, for instance, exerts enormous energy building a nest and feeding its young. It acts in such a way, says Dawkins, because its offspring carry 50 percent of its genes, and taking care of them contributes towards the continuation of its genes. Of course, the bird is not consciously thinking about all of this when it cares for its young. Rather, genes programming such behavior have been effective in replicating themselves, and as a result they continue to exist today and influence the bird's actions.³⁷ Mama bird's actions turn out to be a bit more complex than they first appear.

The fact that family members share genes with each other goes a long way towards explaining why helping behavior is so common between them. But Dawkins is certainly not out of the woods yet. Biological factors aside, we often exclude helping behavior between related individuals from discussions of altruism because of the close bonds they have with each other. If Dawkins is going to truly demonstrate his sweeping claim that altruism has no place whatsoever in nature, he will have to explain why there exists helping behavior between creatures with no kin ties. This task proves to be much more daunting for Dawkins's selfish gene theory. One option not open to Dawkins is simply denying the existence of altruistic action between non-

³⁶ Ibid., 202-33.

³⁷ Ibid., 109-22.

related organisms because, as we have already seen, such behavior is quite common. Dawkins recognizes this point, forcing him justify his theory in light of such action.

One example of altruism that Dawkins considers is the behavior of different species of birds, such as dunnocks and reed-warblers, that unwittingly care for and feed young cuckoos. To be sure, such birds are not the good Samaritans of the bird world, searching out young hatchlings in need of help. Rather, their behavior is due to a sly biological adaptation that cuckoos have developed: cuckoo eggs resemble those of other species of birds and, when laid in the other birds' nests, they often take care of the cuckoos just as if they were their own offspring.³⁸ Although an analogous situation in a human context would be treated as a case of being hoodwinked rather than genuine altruism, from a biological perspective it is clearly altruism. In giving valuable limited resources to care for the cuckoo that could easily be used to increase their own young's chances of survival, a cuckoo's foster parents decrease their own fitness at the expense of the cuckoo's.

According to Dawkins, cuckoos' ability to get other species of birds to care for them represents a case of exploiting selfish genes so that they act in an altruistic way. Cuckoos emulate stimuli to which other birds respond to in ways that, in most circumstances, increase their fitness. So hard wired into a dunnock, say, is responding to hatchlings with their mouths gaping open by feeding them. A gene or genes leading to such a behavior in general is successful in replicating itself, since in most cases the hatchlings that the dunnock sees are its own, which possess half of its own genes. By increasing the survival rate of what is usually the dunnock's offspring, such genes increase their own survival rate. The strategy, though, is general enough to allow the cuckoo to take advantage of it. As a result, the dunnock finds itself drawn inexorably to caring for the cuckoo. In describing the dunnock's behavior, Dawkins writes that "Fooled is the

³⁸ Ibid., 248.

wrong word to use. Its nervous system is being controlled, as irresistibly as if it were a helpless drug addict, or as if the cuckoo were a scientist plugging electrodes into its brain.”³⁹

Dawkins’s explanation certainly seems sound, but it does nothing to change the fact that a dunnoek caring for cuckoos still exhibits altruism. Moreover, such behavior has a firm genetic basis, and is by no means an aberration. Of course, evolution helps to explain the replication of genes in terms of fitness, but that does not mean that genes have a “motive” to increase fitness and that those failing to maximize this goal are somehow “wrong.” It is clear that Dawkins must cede some ground with regards to his claim that altruism has no place in nature. In his focus on genes as the driving force of life, he pushes aside and downplays altruism at the level of the organism. Dawkins himself recognizes that the gene’s perspective is one thing and the organism’s another,⁴⁰ which makes it all the more surprising why he extrapolates from the characteristics of genes to make rash claims about altruism’s (non-)existence in nature. Even if genes are “selfish” as Dawkins says, they still can predispose organisms to act altruistically. Altruism can arise incidentally from genes that on the whole lead to behaviors that increase fitness. Perhaps some altruistic behaviors, through evolutionary pressure, will give way to more efficient behaviors from the perspective of fitness. But such a result is far from inevitable or even likely. As Jeffrey Schloss writes, “it turns out that natural selection is not sufficient to micromanageally prevent all altruistic behavior from emerging.”⁴¹ Being closely tied to cooperation, which has significant benefits in evolutionary terms, altruism’s existence should not come as a surprise. Altruism is just as much a part of nature as the competition driving Darwin’s theory.

³⁹ Ibid., 249.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 46-47, 254.

⁴¹ Jeffrey P. Schloss, “Emerging Accounts of Altruism: ‘Love Creation’s Final Law?’” in *Altruism & Altruistic Love*, ed. Stephen G. Post et al., 222.

Motivational Barriers to Normative Altruism

Altruism appears to be real, but of course this fact alone is not sufficient for concluding that altruism is normative. Lots of other things exist—cruelty, lasciviousness, lying—that we do not consider to be normative. For altruism to be normative, it must meet the three criteria laid out in the introduction: it is (1) something we value, which is (2) able to motivate, and whose (3) motivation can be translated to other actors. We have made the reasonable assumption that altruism is something we value, so the focus of this section will be on seeing if altruism meets the two criteria pertaining to motivation, (2) and (3).

To determine whether altruism succeeds as a normative ideal, it is first necessary to analyze altruistic motivation in detail. What makes altruism distinctive is how it motivates action, rather than the form such action takes. It is impossible to say that any act *per se* is altruistic without knowing its underlying motivation. Even the seemingly altruistic act of sacrificing one's life to save another's is not altruistic when the underlying motive is to attain glory. For this act or any other to be altruistic, the motivation of the actor in question must take a certain form—namely, it is directed towards improving the welfare of others rather than one's own.

There has been much debate and confusion over the possibility of altruistic motivation. Even after going through all the various evidence in the section above, someone may persist in raising the following objection: “Don’t all actions begin with a desire, and aren’t all the desires that I act on *my* desires, which then means that all my actions realize a desire of mine and are in my self-interest?” The defender of altruism has to take this objection seriously. Before accepting empirical evidence for altruism, first it is necessary to demonstrate that altruistic motivation is

logically coherent. If it turns out that all motivation begins with subjective desires, we would have good reason to conclude that altruism is impossible.

To avoid this conclusion, it is necessary to provide an account of altruistic motivation that, at the least, is logically possible and, optimally, is plausible and recognizable. But before jumping into altruistic motivation, we first have to look at the most familiar kind of motivation, egoistic motivation or motivation based on subjective interests. Such motivation, in a nutshell, consists of having a certain need or desire, which encourages one to take whatever action necessary to bring about the satisfaction of this need or desire. Put another way, if an actor has a desire *d* and knowledge that action *a* will satisfy *d*, the actor's egoistic motivation takes the form of her thinking, "I ought to do *a*." Egoistic motivation, then, only operates given certain premises—presence of a desire and knowledge of how to satisfy that desire.

So in egoistic motivation, a desire sets the process in motion, eventually leading to an ought directing action. Yet it is also possible to imagine the ought coming first, which, I am going to suggest, is how altruistic motivation functions. Altruistic motivation begins with the perception that a specific action *ought* or, more emphatically, *needs* to be done. Take the following example: a library patron sees a book teetering and about ready to fall on a librarian. The patron perceives that the harm about to befall the librarian ought to be averted. What exactly the altruist perceives and motivates her is, from her perspective, a brute fact: although certain events precede the fact, much of its content—in particular, the ought—has no recognizable basis in anything else. Unlike egoistic motivation, there is no preceding desire that gives rise to the ought. The altruistic ought arises seemingly out of nowhere.⁴² But, despite its enigmatic nature, the altruist's perception of the need to act is just as real to her as the teetering book she sees.

⁴² This line of thinking follows David Hume's idea that it is impossible to go from "is" to "ought," or, in other words, to derive a moral conclusion from non-moral premises, which he discusses in his *Treatise of Human Nature*,

The ought in altruistic motivation has a superficially mysterious quality to it, yet there is no reason to conclude that it represents some objective moral law ordering the cosmos. A helpful analogy is found in comparing what the altruist perceives to an instinct. The analogy is imperfect because the demands motivating an altruist probably have a learned as well as biological basis. Nevertheless, the comparison with an instinct captures the idea that the altruist cannot point to any specific cause for the ought she perceives—it is simply there and demands action. Of course, hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary development explain how instincts—and, as has been suggested, how altruism—arose. But it still remains the case that an individual’s current perceptions alone fail to provide an apparent cause for instinctual or altruistic motivation. In that sense, the altruistic ought or the instinctual ought strikes those experiencing it as disconnected from the rest of reality, seemingly springing out of nothingness to motivate them.

This analogy with instinct is consistent with the intuitive belief that altruism only works when it comes natural to an actor, rather than after a deliberate choice.⁴³ Once one has to stop, sit back, and reflect on the costs and benefits of being altruistic, altruistic motivation no longer seems to be at work. Someone who frames altruism in cost-benefit terms misses the entire point of altruism—sacrificing for another *in spite of* the costs.

Although altruistic motivation works naturally, almost instinctually, deliberation still plays a role in the altruist’s decision making process. This point becomes clear after an altruist initially perceives that an action needs to be done. In this initial perception, the concept of self—

2nd ed., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), III, i, 1. Of course, there are debates about what Hume exactly means in this passage. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Hume does not deny the possibility of deriving “ought” from “is,” but rather cautions us to be careful when making such a move. On MacIntyre’s interpretation, Hume spends most of Part III of the *Treatise* showing that one makes the transition by deriving ought from human needs, interests, and desires (see “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’” *The Philosophical Review* 68 (1959): 461-66). Regardless of the accuracy of MacIntyre’s interpretation, it is important to recognize that the substantive point he makes does not draw into question our conception of the altruistic ought. Oughts can be traced back to desires, but the altruistic ought remains unique because no desire precedes it.

⁴³ Colin Grant, *Christianity and Altruism*, New Studies in Christian Ethics, ed. Robin Gill (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xix.

the altruist's sense of self, that is—is completely absent; in other words, there is no *I*. The perception simply takes the form, “Such and such an action needs (or ought) to be done.” For the altruist, whether she or someone else performs the action is, at least initially, irrelevant—it just needs to be done. If an actor sees it as essential that she perform the action in question, she is primarily focused on herself rather than the need of another, and thus her motivation fails to be altruistic. It is not until the altruist realizes that she is in the best position to allay the need that she thinks, “I need (or ought) to do such and such an action.” Sometimes this realization may arrive simultaneously with the perception that a certain action needs to be done, such as when a child besides us reaches his hand towards a fire. Normally in this case deliberation does not precede our action because by reflex we pull the child's hand away from the fire. In other situations, however, the altruist has to deliberate before deciding whether she is in the best position to take the action in question. Moreover, even after concluding that she is in the best position to help, she still often has to deliberate on which action to take. Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, for example, had to deliberate on whether they were in the best position to save those in danger, as well as on which course of action would best realize this goal.

Having traced out what altruistic motivation looks like, we can return to the question of whether altruism meets the two motivational criteria for normativity. The second criterion stipulates that a normative ideal, in this case altruism, must be able to motivate. Altruism certainly appears to meet this criterion. We have shown that egoistic motivation does not necessarily encompass all varieties of human motivation, demonstrating that altruistic motivation is at least a logical possibility. More importantly, we also provided evidence strongly supporting the possibility of altruistic motivation in human beings. The most basic level of evidence is its intuitive appeal. The account of altruistic motivation given strikes us as plausible and, for many

of us, closely resembles some of our own motivations. Such evidence, arrived at via “armchair” theorizing, is important, yet by itself proves unsatisfactory. In the end, the philosopher or scientist wants a theory that makes non-trivial predictions supported by empirical evidence. Our theory of altruistic motivation does make such predictions, namely, that there should be examples of individuals furthering others’ interests even when they lack a subjective desire to do so. We have already seen that numerous experiments and case studies in the fields of biology and psychology confirm this prediction. All the evidence points towards altruism’s existence and, by consequence, its possibility.

A skeptic may challenge this conclusion, raising the objection that it is impossible to be completely sure that altruistic motivation actuated the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, the participants in Batson’s experiments, or any other “altruist” we may want to consider. From one point of view, the skeptic is right: one always has reason to object because, no matter how much empirical evidence one adduces for a theory of altruistic motivation, one cannot in the strictest sense prove it. The skeptic’s objection always holds due to the invalid form characterizing arguments from induction, as are used in the scientific method. The formalization of such an argument illustrates this point. So if we take P as standing for “A theory *t* is true” and Q as standing for “There are observations *x*, *y*, and *z*,” an argument from induction has the following form:

- (1) If P, then Q
- (2) Q
- (3) So P

As any student into introductory logic knows, this argument is not valid, which gives the skeptic reason to question the truth of conclusion P. This objection against altruism’s existence, however, could be leveled against any theory appealing to empirical evidence—quantum

mechanics, relativity, evolution, or any other widely accepted scientific theory.⁴⁴ In this light, the skeptic's objection to altruism loses its teeth, as long as one accepts the scientific method. Given the evidence—numerous instances of helping behavior without any related egoistic desires—altruistic motivation best explains such actions. It is safe to conclude, then, that altruistic motivation exists and is indeed possible. That is, altruism meets the second criterion for normativity.

The third criterion is the last and most difficult obstacle that a normative argument for altruism has to overcome. To meet this criterion, an actor must be able to translate the altruistic motivation she experiences to others. The form that altruistic motivation takes makes it difficult to translate to others, at least on a consistent basis. Altruistic motivation starts out with the perception of a brute, instinct-like fact. It is the sort of fact that eludes explanation—you either get it or you don't. So among individuals who do perceive such facts, an altruist can easily translate her motivation to others. But when confronted with individuals who deny perceiving such a fact, the altruist has little to which she can appeal. The altruist's perception—a certain action needs to be done—is irreducible. Unlike with egoistic motivation, the altruist cannot link her motivation with a preceding desire because it has no basis in desire. In fact, she cannot appeal to desires or interests at all: even if such a strategy motivates them, their motivation will be egoistic, not altruistic, in nature. How, then, can the altruist make her motivation understandable and real to non-altruists? Frustrated, we can imagine her posing the emphatic question, "But can't you see it?!" She inevitably will find any negative responses to her question befuddling, since from her point of view the altruistic ought is real and patently obvious.

One last and perhaps promising path open to the altruist is getting non-altruists to empathize with others, in the hope that this exercise will give rise to altruistic motivation within

⁴⁴ Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 71-77.

them. Batson used this method quite successfully in his experiments on altruism. He consistently found that individuals were more likely to act altruistically after empathizing with others and coming to understand their needs. Empathy makes sense as a tool for motivating altruism, since one first has to understand the needs of others before taking action to help them. Through empathy, it may in fact prove possible to make altruistic motivation real to others.

Despite its promise, empathy falls short of being a solution to altruism's normative problems. To be sure, human beings are constituted psychologically in such a way that empathy creates a propensity for altruism. Yet, at the same time, nothing about empathy guarantees altruism. The same knowledge that allows one to know how to further others' interests can also be used to inflict harm on them. Since empathy provides insight into what would be the most cataclysmic to others' desires and interest, the door is open for using it in a malevolent way. The cruelest torturers, for instance, are those that truly understand their victims' suffering, and with such knowledge make their pain especially acute. The torturer's use of empathy illustrates a general point: nothing about the experience of empathy entails altruistic motivation. The altruist, then, remains unable to communicate to others the pesky altruistic ought she perceives. Either they see it or they don't, which is where debates about altruism's normativity necessarily end. The altruist's inability to communicate her motivation to others forces her to concede that altruism fails at a normative level.

Hard-line defenders of altruism's normative status will resist making this concession. On their view, non-altruists do perceive the altruist's reasons for action—they just refuse to act on them. Kant and, to a certain extent, Nagel take this view. They argue that human nature is structured in such a way that, regardless of one's subjective desires, one cannot fail to perceive the altruistic ought. This argument, though correct in many respects, needs qualification. Without

a doubt, *some* individuals do perceive the altruistic ought by virtue of their nature. (Thus, something along the lines of Nagel's objective reasons probably do exist.) But those arguing for normative altruism want to make a stronger claim: *all*, not some, individuals perceive this ought. In Kantian terms, the reasons on which the altruist acts are categorical, which means that they are capable of motivating all individuals irrespective of contingent characteristics about them.

This defense of normative altruism is problematical because it fails to take seriously the disagreement existing over altruistic motivation. In claiming that non-altruists are guilty of ignoring altruistic motivation without exception, those backing normative altruism peremptorily discount how others perceive motivation. Certainly, some individuals fail to act on altruistic motivation either out of weakness of will or the presence of a stronger motivation. Yet others deny experiencing altruistic motivation at all. "We perceive no altruistic ought," they steadfastly avow. Either these individuals are sincere in their claims, or they are part of a massive conspiracy theory against altruistic motivation. The latter position, which defenders of normative altruism in effect hold, tilts the argument unfairly in their favor. These believers in normative altruism give privileged status to their perceptions, while dismissing those of their opponents.

Such an argumentative strategy has its basis in a particularly flawed view of human nature. Those defending normative altruism take human nature to be homogenous with respect to experiencing altruistic motivation, and then they try to shove everyone into this narrow box. This characterization of human nature, however, is increasingly untenable in light of discoveries in neurobiology, as we have already seen. Neurobiologists have found that differences in cognitive structures affect the way individuals are motivated. These studies make a very basic but important point: human nature varies greatly, not least of all in the area motivation. Not all

individuals can experience altruistic motivation. That is no reason to demonize these individuals; rather, it is reason to reject the common sense belief that altruism is normative.

Changing the Way We Talk about Altruism

After analysis, the concept of altruism looks noticeably different. We put to rest the notion that altruism is a mere chimera, adducing a wide range of evidence for its existence. We also found problems with the view that altruism is normative. Because of the unique form that altruistic motivation takes, an altruist often finds herself unable to motivate others to altruism. These motivational barriers to altruism have the effect of making it impossible for certain individuals to be altruistic. A normative view of the altruism ultimately proves unpalatable because it demands altruistic action of those incapable of it. Together, these conclusions can be summed up in the following claim: altruism is a descriptive phenomenon that fails on a normative level.

This claim is controversial, especially the element concerning normativity. Although not universal, beliefs about altruism's normative status are deeply ingrained and widely held. Given such strong beliefs, instead of rejecting normative altruism one may choose to rethink our conception of normativity. The requirement that moral ideals must be able to motivate others, without qualification, sets the bar for normativity especially high, perhaps unreasonably so.

Two possible revisions for our conception of normativity come from the naturalist and communitarian camps. To start with the naturalists, some suggest that we should drop the requirement that moral claims possess the ability to motivate everyone. In other words, a given ideal does not have to provide categorical reasons to be normative.⁴⁵ Since no reasons appear to motivate all individuals at all times—if so, where are they?—only a misguided conception of normativity demands such reasons. Although an initially appealing view, it has a problematic

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 201-204.

consequence: it allows for normative claims that do not motivate individuals, and by consequence are impossible for them to carry out. If someone completely lacks motivation to perform a certain action, they lack the ability perform it. By demanding the impossible at times, this naturalist view of normativity intuitively strikes us as unjust. Furthermore, such a view dramatically alters moral discourse. On our conception of normativity, motivating others is a necessary part of moral discourse, and thus it succeeds only when its participants find reasons for an action real and valid. A naturalist, on the other hand, at times will accept normative claims that fail to provide others with reasons for action. Normativity, instead of being practical without qualification, now only proves practical when it is convenient for the naturalist. Instances thus arise when moral discourse is utterly irrelevant and useless. If there is no hope of providing reasons to motivate, why even make a normative argument? In such a situation, any attempts at moral discourse inevitably will take on the quality of a fiat. By reducing moral discourse in such a way and severely restricting normativity's practical side, the naturalist's revision of normative views ultimately proves untenable. So though altruism could be normative on the naturalist's account, the problems plaguing such an account of normativity provide little reason to change our views on altruism.

The revision offered by the communitarian is more promising, as it tries to facilitate and enrich moral discourse. For the communitarian, conceptions of normativity are social constructs, existing in a specific community at a specific time. The normative views of a community are dependent on a vast array of beliefs, assumptions, and traditions present within it. Only those steeped in this cultural background truly can understand the normative views arising out of it. Conceptions of normativity, then, are tied and necessarily limited to the communities in which they exist. This way of understanding normativity directly gives way to a more modest

motivational requirement: normative claims still have to motivate others but they only apply to individuals in one's community. Since, on this picture, moral discourse occurs among individuals with shared values, it stands a better chance of successfully motivating others to action.

Although the communitarian conception of normativity is less stringent, it makes little room for normative altruism. For altruism to be normative in a society, perception of the altruistic ought would have to be prevalent throughout it. Biological differences in individuals, even in relatively homogenous communities, alone seem to preclude this possibility. A community could try to overcome the biological obstacles by inculcating altruism, perhaps through emphasizing empathy. Yet this approach will be unable to avoid the difficulties involved in moving from empathy to altruistic motivation. These various points suggest that altruists are not concentrated in certain communities, but rather are sprinkled throughout them. Some of the evidence we have seen for altruism also backs up this view. In Monroe's study of altruists, she found no correlation between altruism and the type of community one grows up in, which led her to the conclusion that communities do not play a major role in encouraging or discouraging altruism. In the apparent lack of a community where the altruistic ought is accepted without question, the communitarian is unable to make room for a normative conception of altruism. But even if there were some community of altruists where altruism is normative, at the very least *we* do not live in such a community. Without a shared sense of the altruistic ought, appeals to normative altruism make little sense in *our* moral discourse.

If one persists in invoking normative altruism, it has the effect of severely hindering moral discourse. It is this aspect of normative altruism, above all others, that proves to be the death knell of arguments in its favor. An altruist is unable to provide any real reasons to motivate

the non-altruist to altruism. When debating the issue of altruism, the altruist and non-altruist are doomed to shouting past each other, unable to engage each other on the same level. This inability to meet others where they are points to the supreme irony about normative arguments for altruism: their lack of empathy. When telling others that morality demands altruism, one fails to understand that such motivation may in fact prove impossible for them. Perhaps that helps to explain why philosophers in ivory towers are the most fervent proponents of normative altruism, rather than, say, the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe discussed above. In interviews, these rescuers shrunk from the idea of lording altruism over others. It seems that those who empathize with others and work to allay their needs—in short, those who *are* altruistic—find themselves too busy to go around making impossible demands of others.

By demanding the impossible, altruism fails as normative ideal. In what state, then, does that leave morality? Despite altruism's insurmountable shortcomings, other avenues are open for pursuing moral discourse. Hume offers a promising suggestion in his *Enquiries*. Here he appeals to people's interests to motivate them to be generous, polite, kind, and in general moral. It is foolish to choose a life of vice over one of virtue, given the tremendous goods promised by the latter. Those who reject the moral life are missing out on incredible happiness. By filling them in on their loss, Hume hopes to encourage them to live differently. Obviously, those who heed his arguments will not act altruistically because they are acting out of self-interest, but they at least will imitate the actions of the altruist—which is nothing to sneeze at. Hume is optimistic that desires and interests can successfully serve as the basis for motivating others and reaching agreement on evaluative matters.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Moral*, in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1975), 9, II.

Hume's approach certainly has its limits, as people's desires, interests, and needs vary greatly from each other, making effective moral discourse unlikely among people with radically different natures. But, at the very least, this strategy is not doomed before the start in the same way normative arguments for altruism are. The prospect of motivating someone to altruism initially blind to the altruistic ought is bleak. In such an instance, there is little point in engaging in moral discourse—what difference will it make? The prospects are better for a strategy that appeals to interests and desires. Even if an individual lacks the desire to carry out a certain action, the possibility exists of bringing about that desire within her. Nothing guarantees success in this approach, but the social nature of human beings certainly helps it along. The general desire to be in harmony with one's fellows drives moral discourse, as it provides a venue for working out disagreement on evaluative matters. For that reason, appeals to human interests and desires hold particular promise when engaging in moral debate, much more so than appeals to normative altruism.

A shift away from normative altruism does not in any way mean that we have to stop valuing altruism. Indeed, even when viewed from a non-normative perspective, altruism still can continue to fascinate us and inspire admiration. This perspective simply involves giving up the requirement that action must be altruistic to be moral. Recognizing its shortcomings as a normative ideal, hopefully we can talk about altruism in a more honest manner. We can start by affirming its existence at a descriptive level, while at the same denying it any normative status.

Conclusion

“[T]hey say that there are some [laws] which are firm, perpetual, and immutable, which they call natural, which are imprinted on the human race by the condition of their very being.... Let them show me just one law of that sort—I’d like to see it.”

— Michel de Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”

After the assumptions behind normative altruism are made explicit, the concept loses much of its appeal. A normative conception of altruism forces us to believe that altruistic motivation is possible for all individuals, which scientific evidence suggests is unlikely. But, though there is good reason to reject normative altruism, its appeal nevertheless persists. One reason why is the extent to which normative views about altruism are ingrained into our culture. Also playing a role in our attitudes towards normative altruism is the underlying fear that, if we give up on altruism’s normative status, before long we will have to give up on normativity altogether. This troubling conclusion turns out to be largely unavoidable, regardless of how much we might want to deny it.

The project of defining morality in terms of altruism attempts to preserve normative beliefs by giving them a firm foundation. This approach ensures that the content of morality is independent of an individual’s contingent characteristics, such as her desires. According to Kant’s specific argument for morality, rationality requires all of us to act altruistically. There is no sense in trying to deny reason’s demands, for they are categorical. Why Kant and so many others have been attracted to this conception of morality is easy to understand: by rendering the demands of morality universal, normative altruism deprives everyone of an excuse to deny these demands.¹

Moral discourse was in need of a strong foundation after eudaimonistic and divine law theories fell out of favor. How normative altruism became the preferred solution is a complicated

¹ See Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 171.

story, full of twists and turns. MacIntyre provides a helpful summary of this revolutionary development in Western moral thought:

The Greek moral tradition asserted—no doubt with many reservations at times—an essential connection between “good” and “good for,” between virtue and desire. One cannot, for Aristotle, do ethics without doing moral psychology; one cannot understand what a virtue is without understanding it as something a man could possess and as something related to human happiness. Morality, to be intelligible, must be understood as grounded in human nature. The Middle Ages preserves this way of looking at ethics. Certainly there is a new element of divine commandment to be reckoned with. But God who commands you also created you and His commandments are such as it befits your nature to obey. So an Aristotelian moral psychology and a Christian view of the moral law are synthesized even if somewhat unsatisfactorily in Thomist ethics. But the Protestant Reformation changes this. First, because human beings are totally corrupt their nature cannot be a foundation for true morality. And next because men cannot judge God, we obey God’s commandments not because God is good but simply because He is God. So the moral law is a collection of arbitrary fiats unconnected with anything we may want to desire.... Kant[’s] ... moral philosophy is, from one point of view, the natural outcome of the Protestant position.²

Obviously, noticeable holes run throughout the history we traced out. For one, there is no mention of Saint Thomas or any of a number of other medieval thinkers. Many influential Protestant figures are missing, too. The account, then, represents nothing more than a first pass at describing a complex development in the history of ideas. But, despite these caveats, the basic conviction remains the same: the Augustinian tradition’s despairing views on human nature provided the foundation for a belief in normative altruism, which Kant’s moral philosophy realized. In other words, the transition from the Kingdom of God to the Kingdom of Ends marked the rise of normative conceptions of altruism.

Our analysis of altruistic motivation revealed numerous problems with the primary conclusion of this development in moral thought. A normative conception of altruism makes the claim that altruistic motivation is a necessary part of moral action, but without honestly

² MacIntyre, “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’” 467-68.

considering whether all individuals are capable of it. Although altruistic motivation is possible for some individuals (in whom it functions similarly to an instinct), translating this motivation to others at times proves impossible. Those individuals immune to the normative force of arguments for altruism find themselves cut off from the possibility of acting altruistically or, in other words, of acting morally. This problematical result goes against a deep belief about normativity—ought implies can. Such a belief emphasizes the importance of making moral arguments accessible to others. A rejection of the ought-implies-can principle would scrap the requirement that moral reasons possess motivational force. The effect on moral discourse would be dramatic, as it would go from an inclusive search for answers to a practice of exchanging fiats. This unacceptable consequence forces us to reject normative altruism.

Our proposed alternative to normative altruism—basing morality on human needs, desires, and interests—attempts to find a conception of morality with more widespread motivational force. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this approach also fails to be wholly satisfactory. Human needs, desires, and interests vary widely, and thus any argument appealing to them fails to have normative force with everyone—just as is the case with arguments for normative altruism. Any hope in universal values inevitably comes crashing down when we confront individuals who find our values to be entirely lacking in motivational force. No matter where we turn, true normativity eludes us.

It is difficult to imagine a moral theory that is able to fully make sense of those who find shared human values irrelevant to their own actions. Even scientific accounts of morality, with a strong factual basis, will leave us feeling that something is missing in the account. A promising new book by the Harvard biologist Marc Hauser suggests that there is a universal moral language innate in human beings, analogous to the universal grammar outlined in Noam Chomsky's

linguistic theory.³ This thesis is certainly interesting, and in many aspects it may turn out to be true. Nevertheless, such a theory cannot resolve the uneasiness of knowing that there are individuals who are indifferent to our moral beliefs. Morality's drive towards social harmony prevents us from simply writing off those who refuse to buy into it as "depraved" or "irrational." Such expressions are of course brandied around, but they ultimately do little to explain the problem of evaluative disagreement. Moral values are of such a transcendent nature⁴ that it is incomprehensible how some individuals can dismiss them out of hand. Although it would be convenient to abandon the view that morality is universal in nature, doing so would render it unrecognizable. After all, if moral values were such that they could be easily ignored, they would cease to capture our attention in the way that they do.

So even if we learn that different biological structures cause differences in moral views, disagreement in moral matters in all likelihood will remain a frustrating matter. Such a discovery will do little to change what our moral sensibilities tell us—namely, that our values hold universally. Certainly, it is easy to find a great deal of congruence among individuals' values. Yet there will always be those—the Nietzsches and Napoleons of the world—who refuse to buy into shared moral values, and thus threaten their normative status. The hope for immutable, universal moral values ends in disappointment.

As we are faced with the longing for universal values and the realization that such values do not exist, perhaps the best moral theory available to us is one that, though not truly normative, is best able to approximate normativity. In this regard, a Humean approach has a distinct advantage over a Kantian one, since generating desires in others is always a possibility in a way

³ Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

⁴ For a discussion of the transcendent, absolute value that moral terms attempt to capture, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3-11.

that generating altruistic motivation is not. Simply put, the former approach holds out better prospects for communicating values, motivating others, reaching agreement, and in general enjoying success in moral discourse. Knowing that complete success is beyond any moral theory, we have to content ourselves with one that achieves more modest goals.

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